In March of 1869, Edwin and Lois Parker sailed to Boston, on furlough from their missionary work in India. There they reunited with William and Clementina Butler, the founders of American Methodism’s mission to India. As the missionary couples chatted with local members of the Tremont Street Church, the oppression of women in India was on everyone’s minds. Could not American women mobilize to do something about the spiritual and physical needs of Indian women? And so pastors read from the pulpit the following Sunday that on March 23, interested women should meet with Mrs. Butler and Mrs. Parker at Tremont Street Church, to found a women’s missionary society. March 23 came with a terrible rain storm. Only six women made it to the Tremont Street Church that afternoon for the meeting with the two missionaries. But the determined women launched a women’s society and called another meeting for the next week. Despite more heavy rain, a larger group of women met on March 30 to adopt a constitution for the “Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church” (WFMS).¹

From these humble beginnings grew the most powerful, influential, and

¹ Early chronologies of these events include Frances J. Baker, *The Story of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1869-1895*, Rev. Ed. (Cincinnati: Curts & Jennings; NY: Eaton & Mains, 1898.); Mrs. L. H. Daggett, *Historical Sketches of Women’s Missionary Societies in America and England* (Boston: Mrs. L H Daggett, 1879); Mary Isham, *Valorous Ventures: A Record of Sixty and Six Years of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society, Methodist Episcopal Church* (Boston: WFMS, MEC, 1936). The Daggett account was implicitly repudiated by the Baker volume because Daggett claimed there were more than eight original founders, including herself. Daggett was likely not present because she was a member of the Charlestown Church, the only one in the area whose minister failed to publicize the invitation to the founding meeting at Tremont Street Church. Baker cites a document signed by the eight founders testifying that they were the only ones present (Baker, *Story of the WFMS*, 13–18). The handwritten minutes of the New England Branch of the W.F.M.S. are held in the New England Methodist Historical Society Archives at the Boston University School of Theology Library, Boston, Massachusetts. On the eight women founders, see Patricia Jewett Thompson, “‘A Handful of Women’: The Origin of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church” (unpub. paper, March 2019). This paper is an edited version of the one presented at the dedication of the windows, Dana L. Robert, “The First Women of Theology: Wives, Missionaries, Deaconesses, and the Beginnings of Boston University,” (unpub. paper, March, 2019). I wish to thank Alex Mayfield for assistance with research for the paper, and Patricia Jewett Thompson for always being ready to track down missing details. It has been challenging to reconstruct the life stories and relationships of women who were memorialized only by their husbands’ names.
important women’s movement in what was then the largest Protestant Church in the United States. Predecessor to today’s United Methodist Women, the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church sent its own missionaries, including the first women medical doctors and founders of women’s colleges in India, China, and other Asian countries. The group bought its own property, published its own periodicals, and sponsored indigenous Bible women around the world. Inspired by the New England women’s example, women across the country founded independent regional branches that collaborated and grew into a worldwide movement.

The WFMS incubated women’s leadership by producing a core group of the first lay women elected to General Conference in 1888, and the first women elders ordained by Methodist Churches in Asia and the United States from the 1930s to the 1950s. In this paper, I show that the founders of the WFMS were intimately connected to the founding of Boston University, and to the emerging public theology of New England Methodism. The paper argues that the founding of the two organizations in 1869 represented the convergence of northern Methodist commitments to higher education, women’s empowerment, and world missions. Using Harriet Warren as an example, the paper demonstrates why the founding of the WFMS is part of the hidden history of women in higher education. It is also the story of their partners—the Methodist men who supported them.

May 26, 1869: Launching the WFMS and Chartering Boston University

A key to these connections can be found in the Boston Daily Advertiser, in an article entitled “The Women’s Missionary Society,” about an event on May 26, 1869.² It described a large crowd gathering for the first public meeting of the new missionary society. In the two months since they first mobilized, the Methodist women of New England had founded an organization, appointed officers, approved a constitution, raised funds, launched a periodical, recruited a missionary, and met with the head of the denominational missionary society and received permission to collaborate with it.

For this important public meeting, supporters gathered at Tremont Street Church, on one of the busiest streets in Boston, around the corner from the Massachusetts State House. According to custom, women in the mid nineteenth century could not chair or speak at “mixed” meetings. Impressively, Governor William Claflin chaired the meeting. Leading men gave speeches. The Society formally elected officers, and the men left. Then the women of the new society pledged on faith to send Miss Isabella Thoburn to India as their first missionary. As the women debated whether to appoint her, despite their lack of funds, a woman rose and said, “Shall we lose Miss Thoburn because we have not the needed money in our hands to send her? No, let us rather walk the streets of Boston in our calico dresses, and save the expense of more costly apparel. I move, then, the appointment of Miss Thoburn as

our missionary to India.”3 On faith, the gathered women borrowed money to send her, and to appoint local Indian women evangelists.

The story of May 26 gets even more interesting in the context of Massachusetts state politics. The same day that Governor Claflin chaired the public meeting of the women’s society, the state legislature passed and he signed the Charter for Boston University. The public launching of the women’s society received more press than the quiet signing of the BU Charter. The Congregationalist paper later simply noted that one accomplishment of the legislative year was the chartering of the “Boston (Methodist) University.”4

It seems that the Boston power elites were not too impressed by the founding of what is today the oldest and largest university affiliated with The United Methodist Church. Ben Hartley has shown in his research that Methodists in late nineteenth-century Boston were evangelical outsiders, from largely small town backgrounds.5 They struggled to change the culture of a city dominated by upper class Unitarians and immigrant Roman Catholics. So who were these Methodist upstarts, who dared to launch publicly a women’s missionary society and a university on the same day? And what did they stand for?

The axis between the State House and the Tremont Street Church on May 26, 1869, signified the convergence of the economic, intellectual, political, and social leadership of New England Methodism. It seems that the men who opened the women’s meeting were a “Who’s Who” of the earliest supporters of Boston University.6 Some were former students of its predecessor schools the Newbury and Concord Biblical Institutes. Women elected as officers were the wives of the faculty and founders of the new University and its predecessor schools. Some had attended the schools themselves. In the signing of the BU charter, and launching a nationwide women’s movement in the largest Protestant church in the United States, New England Methodists united behind the expansion of higher education, the support of independent journalism, the empowerment of women, and global outreach. The founding of Boston University and the WFMS at the same time was no coincidence. Through them, the Methodists of New England claimed a public space in the intellectual and civic life of the Northeast, if not the nation.

The educational work of the men and the missionary work of the women were like the right and the left hands of the same energy, commitments, and values. A run-down of participants in the women’s meeting on May 26 proves the point. Methodist Governor Claflin was a noted intellectual, abo-

3 Baker, Story of the WFMS, 24.
4 “The Legislature has adjourned,” Congregationalist and Boston Recorder (Boston, Massachusetts) 1 July, 1869: 8.
6 I first noticed the connection between the founding of the WFMS and the founding of Boston University when I was doing research for my book American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice (Macon: Mercer UP, 1997). See especially pages 141–144. Writing this paper has allowed me to follow through on what I noticed twenty-five years ago.
litionist, and supporter of higher education. A founder of the Free Soil Party and then a national leader of the anti-slavery Republican Party, at the time he signed the Charter for Boston University, he was also founding Claflin University for freed slaves in South Carolina. He was the first governor of Massachusetts to support women’s right to vote. The governor and his father Lee Claflin were major supporters of the anti-slavery and pro-women’s rights Methodist paper Zion’s Herald. Not only was Lee Claflin one of the founders of Boston University, he was also a founder and major financial supporter of the biblical institutes that led to Boston University, including being vice-president of its immediate predecessor the Boston Theological Seminary. Naturally, both Mrs. Lee Claflin and Mrs. William Claflin were elected Vice-Presidents of the new women’s missionary society.

Rev. John Twombly, who opened the women’s public meeting with prayer, was himself a noted educator as superintendent of schools in Charlestown and fourth president of the University of Wisconsin. He had attended Newbury Seminary, then Institute, as did his wife Betsey Dow, who in 1837 was the first woman teacher at Newbury Seminary—in the subject of Moral Philosophy, i.e. psychology. As Betsey Twombly, she was a lead organizer of the women’s missionary society and one of its vice-presidents. Opening speaker, Rev. Dr. William F. Warren, drew up the charter of Boston University in his living room. He became its first president and dean of its School of Theology. His wife, Harriet, was a key organizer and Corresponding Secretary of the WFMS, President of the New England

9 The predecessor schools of Boston University were the Newbury Biblical Institute (1839–1847), the Concord Biblical Institute (1847–1867), and the Boston Theological Seminary (1867–1871). For the history of Boston University, see Kathleen Kilgore, Transformations: A History of Boston University (Boston: Boston University, 1991); Sally Ann Kydd, Boston University (Portsmouth, NH: Arcadia, 2002). For a history of the School of Theology, see Richard Morgan Cameron, Boston University School of Theology 1839–1968 (Boston: Boston University School of Theology, 1968). See also the website, A People’s History of the School of Theology, https://www.bu.edu/sth-history/. The online site is a collaborative project of multiple generations of graduate students and faculty associated with the Center for Global Christianity and Mission.
10 In American Women in Mission, I mistakenly wrote that Mrs. Lee Claflin was William Claflin’s mother (142). William Claflin’s mother died when he was young. Thus Mrs. Lee (Polly) Claflin was his stepmother, not mother.
Branch, and Editor for 24 years of its periodical *Heathen Woman’s Friend*.  

Then came the two speakers about India, both founding missionaries of Methodism there, and the husbands of the two missionary founders of the WFMS—Lois Parker and Clementina Butler.  

From 1869 to 1872, Rev. William Butler taught the history, religions, and literature of India in the Boston Theological School.  

Prior to going to India as a missionary, the future missionary bishop Rev. Edwin Parker had attended both the Newbury and the Concord Biblical Institutes.  

His new bride Lois joined him in Concord to be educated for mission work before they sailed to India.  

Edwin Parker drew up the constitution of the women’s society and ran interference when the denominational backlash tried to silence it fifteen years later in 1884.  

Among other officers of the new WFMS were multiple women connected with the men connected with Boston University.  

The first president elected that day was Mehitable Perley Baker, wife of the former head of both Newbury and Concord Biblical Institutes, Bishop Osmon C. Baker.  

Mehitable also had taught at the Newbury Seminary herself.  

Among the Vice-Presidents of the Society were Mrs. David Patten, wife of the professor of practical theology and librarian in the School of Theology, and Registrar of Boston University;  

Mrs. Isaac Rich, wife of one of the three official found-  

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14 The day journals of Harriet Merrick Warren are kept in the Gottlieb Archives, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, MA.  

When I first consulted these journals in the 1990s, they were still wrapped in brown paper and string.  

Her personal copies of *Heathen Woman’s Friend*, with embossed initials, are held in the Boston University School of Theology.  

Harriet Warren, like many of the women mentioned in this paper, deserves further research.  


Mrs. Lois Parker needs further research.  

Not only did she found the WFMS, but she attended the Concord Biblical Institute alongside her husband and thus was technically an alumna of Boston University.  

16 Unpublished spread sheet of faculty, Boston University School of Theology, in possession of author.  

See also “Faculty of Boston University, 1867–1890,” *A People’s History of the School of Theology*, https://www.bu.edu/sth-history/faculty/boston-university-1867-1890/.  

17 See Messmore *Life of Edwin Wallace Parker*, 128.  

The Parkers also launched the deaconess movement in India and thus supported women’s empowerment both in New England and India.  

Messmore discusses the background of Lois Parker in *Life of Edwin Wallace Parker*, 38–39.  

18 Boston University retains a large collection of Baker’s personal correspondence, sermons, addresses, and personal items.  


Wesleyan University also houses a large archive of his materials.  

See the finding guide (https://www.wesleyan.edu/libr/schome/FAs/ba1000-85.xml).  

For letters to Mehitable from Osmon C. Baker, see the Rev. Osmon Cleander Baker Collection at the Archives of the Boston University School of Theology.  

See also the School of Theology Library Digital Exhibit https://motiveart.omeka.net/exhibits/show/inmissiontobostonandtheworld/mehitableperleybaker.  

19 On David Patten, see http://www.heirloomssreunited.com/2012/12/page-in-autograph-album-signed-by-rev.html.  

Patten was Principal at Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham, then theology professor at the biblical institutes.  

He was also one of the original trustees of Boston University, as were John Twombly and William F. Warren.
ers of Boston University; and Mrs. Erastus Wentworth, wife of the lecturer in missions and Chinese religions and literature. One of the eight WFMS founders, Mrs. Thomas A. Rich, was related by marriage to Isaac Rich. The connections between Boston University and women’s mission work continued strong at least to the end of the century, including the recruitment of women missionaries from the undergraduate and medical school populations and from professors’ families. The daughter of BU founder Jacob Sleeper, Elizabeth Sleeper Davis, was a major benefactor of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society, and the Sleeper money went to found the first Methodist women’s hospital and medical school in China.

Although the men and women supported each other, in practical terms the men founded Boston University with the support of their wives, while the women engaged in outreach supported by their husbands and fathers.

The collaboration of New England Methodists to found the university and the women’s society in 1869 signaled their increasingly global outlook in the late 1800s. For the victorious northerners, the period of destructive civil war was giving way to a period of expansionism and growing national aspirations. The founding of new institutions represented the fusion of New England Methodists’ commitment to co-educational higher education, the empowerment of women, and the cause of world missions. Examining each of these factors in turn helps explain why the founders succeeded where and when they did.

Expanding Methodist Higher Education

By the mid-1840s, Methodism had become the largest Protestant denomination in the United States—composed of ordinary Americans, both black and white, struggling to improve their lives and to provide opportunities for their children. They had established thirteen colleges by 1844, a number second only to the more established Presbyterians. But it was not until after the Civil War that higher education became a funding priority for most Methodists. The chartering of Boston University represented the culmination of half a century of efforts to expand Methodist education in New England.

20 Based on census records, it appears that Thomas A. Rich lived for a time in the household of Isaac Rich, and Isaac Rich’s will left money to the children of Thomas A. Rich. Many thanks to Patricia Thompson for tracking down this information. Isaac and Sarah Rich are buried in Mt. Auburn Cemetery, along with all of their children, none of whom lived long enough to have children of their own. Rich’s status as major benefactor to the Boston Theological Seminary is carved on his funeral monument. https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/26821965/isaac-rich.

21 Mrs. Sleeper Davis was a close friend of missionary Clementina Butler. The Elizabeth Sleeper Davis Hospital was the pride and joy of the WFMS work in China, and it is referenced numerous times in annual reports of the various WFMS branches and in official publications. Patricia Jewett Thompson, “Elizabeth Sleeper Davis, WFMS Philanthropist,” Historical Bulletin World Methodist Historical Society 29 (Fourth Quarter 2000): 5–7.

22 The expansive outlook in the country was symbolized decisively by the completion of the transcontinental railroad at Promontory Point on May 10, 1869, less than two weeks before the first public meeting of the WFMS at Tremont Street Church.
The sacred history of Boston University laid out in the historical register of 1911 is an interesting place to begin in tracing the values and self-identity of the early university. The chronology of the university begins with “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word became flesh, And dwelt among us.” The mythical charter continued with the evangelization of Great Britain, the founding of schools at Canterbury, and the translation of the gospel of John into Old English by the Venerable Bede. Then came the founding of Oxford and the translation of Scriptures into English by Wyclif and Tyndale. The BU sacred history heralds John Wesley as “a new Wyclif.” It continued with the importance of Oxford man Thomas Coke, and the subsequent founding of Cokesbury College in 1784, the same year as the founding of American Methodism. By 1824, the pillar of light shifted to Massachusetts, when Senator Abel Bliss, educated at Cokesbury College, founded Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham, Massachusetts. Seven years later, the various founders of Wesleyan Academy launched Wesleyan University. Although they continuously struggled for funds, both Wesleyan Academy and Wesleyan University were officially endorsed by the New England annual conferences.

In 1839, Methodists celebrated the centennial of John Wesley’s movement. The leading men from the Methodist conferences in New England, plus the founders and supporters of the Wesleyan Academy and University, held an educational conference in Boston. They launched a school for ministerial training, which they located in Newbury, Vermont, by building upon a pre-existing Methodist Newbury Seminary. After a sojourn in Concord, New Hampshire, this by now substantial institution relocated to Boston in 1867 as the Boston Theological Seminary. In 1869, according to the 1911 sacred lineage, the translated Word of God—seen as the source of American democratic values—resulted in the founding of Boston University. The theological seminary became its founding school. The first baccalaureate address at the new university was based on the motto of Oxford University, Dominus illuminatio mea, “The Lord is my Light,” from Psalm 27. The identity of the university was thus framed by claiming a biblical and histori-
cal “Protestant” lineage of “learning, virtue, and piety.”

Links in the chain leading to Boston University included the students of the Wilbraham Academy who went on to attend Wesleyan University, or who attended the Newbury and Concord Institutes, and then founded Boston University. Bishop Osmon Baker, for example, who was the first student registered at Wesleyan University, was the first teacher of theology at the Newbury Biblical Institute, and then the Principal of Concord Biblical Institute. The ministers who agitated for founding Boston University had attended Wesleyan University or the Newbury/Concord Institutes. Most importantly, the three official founding trustees of Boston University, Jacob Sleeper, Isaac Rich, and Lee Claffin, had been since the 1840s the trustees and benefactors of the Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham, Wesleyan University, and the Newbury, Concord and Boston Theological Institutes. These three self-made businessmen, at the ends of their lives, used their accumulated wealth and prestige to get the charter approved by the state legislature. They collaborated with younger Massachusetts-based Wesleyan graduates to launch a new university, and then gave over their remaining resources to culminate their lives of philanthropy.

In founding the university, Massachusetts men shifted the center of Methodist higher education from small town Connecticut to urban Boston. This move signaled the post-war cosmopolitan ambitions of New England Methodists. Here is where the grand vision of the author of the BU charter enters the picture. The Rev. Dr. William Fairfield Warren had attended both the Wesleyan Academy and Wesleyan University, before going to Germany for advanced study. The Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham was a highly successful preparatory school. The 1877 state report on education notes that from its founding in 1818 by Methodist clergy, 17,000 students had attended, of whom 2/5 were women and one/third members of other denominations.

The Wesleyan Academy featured a full college preparatory course at a time when there were scarcely any university-trained Methodists in New England. College-bound graduates went on to Yale, Amherst, or Wesleyan. After returning from Germany and becoming a pastor in Wilbraham, Warren met his wife Harriet Merrick, daughter in a leading Methodist family. In 1861, at age 18, she married Warren and they sailed to Bremen, Germany, where Warren would be teaching in a theological school. In 1866, to coincide with the centennial of American Methodism, the trustees of the Biblical

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27 The Motto of Boston University, “Learning, Virtue, and Piety,” reflects the historic, holistic public theology of the university: the learning of languages and useful arts, combined with public virtues toward social transformation, and the self-disciplined piety of the Methodist movement.


Institute decided to raise funds to move it to Boston. At that point the school was the largest theological seminary in New England. Harvard extended an invitation to host it in Cambridge. But objecting to Harvard’s Unitarianism, Methodist clergy preferred their own more evangelical public vision.

Thirty-three-year-old William Warren returned from his missionary post in Germany, to become professor of systematic theology and interim head of the theological seminary as it moved from Concord to Boston. Over the next couple of years, he outlined his expansive vision of a university to the trustees of the theological school, who knew his brother Henry, pastor of Tremont Street Church during the 1860s. Warren proposed joining professional schools with liberal arts colleges, and a graduate school, to create a comprehensive university. This ground-breaking university would be the first one open to women in all degree programs. Unlike Yale, Harvard, and other existing colleges, it would feature graduate education that required holding bachelor’s degrees as a prerequisite, and medical and law schools with structured requirements. These were highly innovative ideas at the time. As in Europe, the University would require that students master both contemporary and ancient languages. In consultation with the three elderly founders, Warren drew up the charter. Very conveniently, the son of founder Lee Claffin was elected governor in time to sign it. The stars aligned. Boston University was born.

Women’s Empowerment

The second major network that cohered around 1869–1870 was support for women’s empowerment, including the right to be educated at the highest levels, to be in ministry, and to vote. At its founding, Boston University proudly announced that one of its unique features was admitting women to all degree programs, including graduate degrees. It staked its flag on the Methodist commitment to co-education. Launching the missionary society affirmed women’s empowerment in more than one way. First, the women’s efforts to provide higher education, medical care, and evangelism for nonwestern women meant that the fight for women’s advancement was a global issue. The women’s society adopted rhetoric of global sisterhood that assumed that all women, everywhere, were sisters who needed to support each other for education and medical care, in the name of Jesus. Second, the women broke with the previous “auxiliary” model of women’s groups by running things themselves and sending their own unmarried women missionaries. These stances required ongoing fights with entrenched conservative men in the denomination. Fortunately, they had strong supporters in

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30 Henry White Warren was William Fairfield Warren’s older brother. During the Civil War, he was pastor of the new Tremont Street Church and also a member of the Massachusetts legislature. In 1880 he was elected Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church. With his second wife Elizabeth Iliff, he co-founded Iliff School of Theology in Denver.

31 See Warren’s rehearsal of the unique features of BU and its superiority to Yale and Harvard at its founding, William F Warren, “University Education in the United States Fifty Years Ago,” Boston University Bulletin VI:5.3 (September 1917).
their own husbands. It was written of President Warren, for example, that he was “one of the strongest friends of the new organization among the ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church.”

Following the Civil War of 1861–1865, young women faced the unimaginable loss of an entire generation of male partners. Women left behind needed to stand on their own feet, and they sought to tear down barriers to their professional advancement. Thus, movements for women’s empowerment surged in the several years after the war. As staunch Republicans, New England Methodist politicians backed progressive social causes. One such cause was women’s suffrage. In Hartford in 1869, Connecticut women founded one of the first organizations promoting women’s right to vote. The Reverend Joseph Cummings, President of nearby Wesleyan University, was vice-president of the suffrage convention. In 1874, he led the petition for women’s suffrage in the Connecticut House of Representatives. Naturally his wife was one of the first vice-presidents of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society. In Massachusetts, Governor Claflin and his wife supported women’s suffrage.

American women did not all get the vote until the passage of the 19th amendment in 1920. But in 1869, progressive evangelical Methodists linked the issue to admitting women into institutions of higher education alongside men. Cummings called co-education “a great characteristic of the educational work and spirit of Methodism.” Colleges throughout the land began considering petitions to allow the admittance of women. Amherst, Middlebury, Brown, and Williams, Congregationalist and Baptist colleges, voted against co-education. But Methodist colleges DePauw, Northwestern, Allegheny, and Wesleyan voted for it. By 1870, more than twice as many Methodist colleges and universities admitted women than those of other denominations. The founding of Boston University, Syracuse, and Vanderbilt—all co-educational—put Methodist institutions in the lead supporting women’s higher education and suffrage. The New England Methodist paper Zion’s Herald actively supported women’s rights to vote and to be educated. The founders of Boston University bankrolled the paper, voted as trustees for co-education at Wesleyan, and supported the co-educational charter for BU as the culmination of their philanthropic giving. Of course, co-education did not guarantee equal access, as scarcely any women in 1869 possessed the classical training necessary to be admitted. But it was a beginning.

Along with the right to education and the right to vote, some progressive northern Methodists supported women’s rights in the churches. Women

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33 Connecticut General Assembly, House of Representatives. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Connecticut, May Session 1874* (New Haven: Stafford Printing, 1874), 81. It is interesting to note also that Cummings, on behalf of 700 others, presented and then withdrew, on July 3, 1874, a petition asking that women’s property be exempt from taxation. No doubt this radical move tried to make the point, on the eve of July 4, that taxation without representation should be illegal (332).
lacked voice and vote in the conferences of the church. Nor could they be ordained. In 1869, just two weeks before the founding of the missionary society, the revivalist Maggie Van Cott was granted a license to preach by a quarterly conference in upstate New York. Other women soon followed. The new women’s missionary movement fed support for women evangelists. By 1871, women missionaries in China were pushing for the recognition of the office of deaconess. By sending unmarried women as missionaries, the women’s missionary society furthered the cause of women’s education. Edwin and Lois Parker, both educated at Concord Biblical Institute, supported the education of women and the training of deaconesses in India. And of course, Isabella Thoburn, the first missionary sent by the women’s society, founded the first women’s college in Asia. A conservative backlash fought both against the licensing of women to preach, and the independence of the women’s missionary society. It was two steps forward and one step back. By 1880, the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church stripped women of their licenses to preach. But they had succeeded in founding a missionary society, gaining recognition for the role of deaconess, and achieving better access to higher education.

**Missionary Globalism**

In 1869, a third movement converged with the founding of Boston University and the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society, namely that of foreign missions. By the 1850s, having become the largest church in the United States, Methodists turned their attention abroad. Commitment to foreign missions signified their growing global consciousness. On February 26, 1869, the Prudential Committee Minutes of the Boston Theological Institute, written by BU founder Jacob Sleeper, voted and recorded “That a Department of Missionary Instruction be established in the Seminary. The object of this department is to give suitable instruction to young men who design to enter the foreign mission work.” In 1888, in a sermon welcoming the Inter-Seminary Alliance to Boston, President Warren noted that Boston University School of Theology was “the very first to introduce and to main-

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36 A number of famous missionaries went out from the Concord Biblical Institute in the 1850s, including Albert Long ‘57, who founded the Bulgarian mission, translated the Bible into Bulgarian, was a key leader of the Bulgarian “enlightenment” and the independence movement, and supported female education; Stephen Baldwin ‘58, noted China missionary (After their return from the field, Baldwin’s wife Esther was President for two decades of the New York Branch of the WFMS); and Edwin and Lois Parker ‘57, missionaries in India. See Wade C. Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions. Part Two: The Methodist Episcopal Church 1845-1939*, vol. 3: *Widening Horizons 1845–1895* (New York: Board of Missions of The Methodist Church, 1957); Vladimir Zhelezov, “Dr. Albert Long and Bulgarian Renaissance.” https://www.academia.edu/9754042/D_r_Albert_Long_and_Bulgarian_Renaissance.
37 Minutes, Prudential Committee, Boston Theological Institute, February 26, 1869, cited in “Missions,” People’s History of the School of Theology, www.bu.edu/sth-history/thematic-index/missions-alternate/. Thanks go to Steve Pentek, former archivist at the School of Theology, for calling my attention to these minutes some years ago.
tained continuously annual courses of lectures in the theory and history and economics of Missions.”38 One entire large graduating class, he noted, saw every single member volunteering for “missionary service.” To Warren, missions included both foreign and home missions, as a seamless whole that fed each other.

The missionary spirit of the seminary launched the teaching of Indian and Chinese history and literature. In 1867, William Butler was teaching the Religions of India, soon adding Indian History and Literature and by 1869, Erastus Wentworth was teaching the “Language, Literature, and Religions of China.” Their wives, of course, were active in the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society. As time went on, courses in Islam, Buddhism, Race Relations, Evangelism among Immigrants, Mission Methods, geographic regions, and related subjects were added. By 1910, the School of Theology bragged that it had sent 100 foreign missionaries. A giant missionary map hung over the common area showing where they had gone. The curriculum fed the movement, with courses not only in mission studies, but in comparative religions.39 The location of STH missionary influence was a two-way street that attracted international students from those areas. So for instance, in the 1890s, three Bulgarians attended the School of Theology.

From a contemporary perspective, the most significant contribution of the missionary emphasis at the early School of Theology was that it laid down the tracks for Boston University to be the leading global university that it is today.40 Students, faculty, and international students traveled back and forth on the missionary highway. WFMS missionaries went to the same foreign locations where male missionaries went. Male-female partnership extended to freelance movements. For example, the great missionary Bishop William Taylor held a Boston revival in 1877. He visited the School of Theology to recruit faith missionaries to open a string of self-supporting schools in Latin America. This kind of entrepreneurial spirit was supported by the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society, whose editor supported Taylor in her column in Heathan Woman’s Friend. Taylor famously said, “When I find a field too hard for a man, I put in a woman.”41 Eight students from the theology school volunteered to go to Latin America with Bishop Taylor, as did several

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39 The teaching of a full missionary course at the School of Theology had interesting implications for the curriculum. For example, returned alum and missionary to Mexico John Barker (STH class of ’77) began teaching Sociology of Religion to help students analyze the immigrant populations among whom they conducted outreach. The teaching of sociology has continued to be part of the School of Theology curriculum since the early 1900s, along with courses in mission studies and theology of religions.
41 Women missionary leaders often quoted Taylor. See for example Caroline Atwater Mason, Lux Christi: An Outline Study of India, A Twilight Land (New York: Macmillan: 1903), 228.
women. The first group who went on the boat to Chile included four men and four women. They traveled steerage because they had no money. Miss Lelia Waterhouse, one of the first group of Latin-American volunteers, spent many years working for the WFMS. All told, Boston University graduates in the late 1800s opened missions in Mexico, Panama, Chile, Ecuador, Brazil, Bolivia, and Peru, not to mention many locations in Europe and Asia.

**Harriet Merrick Warren as Exemplar**

The wife of the president of Boston University, Harriet Merrick Warren, was the intellectual center of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society. Scarcely remembered today, her importance lay in her stellar leadership of movements central to the public identity of late nineteenth-century northern Methodism. A quick perusal of her contributions to the WFMS and beyond demonstrates how its founding was tied to that of Boston University, and how together Methodist men and women partnered to advance higher education, women’s empowerment, and world missions.

Harriet Warren was a public intellectual and a social activist. Her education at Wesleyan Academy, followed by living in Germany with her husband, gave her a global, cosmopolitan perspective. From a young age, Mrs. Warren was a fine musician, and she developed fluency in German, French, and Italian. She played a large role in educational reform at multiple levels. She was a founder and Trustee of the New England Conservatory, which was originally a Methodist effort to provide musical training to the poor. She was one of two female board members of the New England Deaconess Home and Training School, the origin of Boston’s Deaconess Hospital. Along with Emily Talbot, the wife of the dean of the Boston University Medical School, Mrs. Warren was a leader in the Massachusetts Society for the University Education of Women. This was a ground-breaking organization formed to support young women’s quest for enrollment in higher education, newly available at Boston University. Mrs. Warren herself had mastered the curriculum at Wilbraham Academy, but had not done the Greek course, which was preparatory to higher education. In an era when a Latin education was necessary for admission, the Massachusetts Society in 1877 petitioned Boston schools to allow girls to be admitted to Boston Latin School. Encouraged by his wife, President Warren mounted a public defense of girls’ co-education for college preparatory courses. This move for coeducation failed, but it did


43 Emily Talbot’s daughter Marion attended Boston University, co-founded the American Association of University Women, and was first Dean of Women at University of Chicago. The effort to help young women like Marion receive the classical training she needed for university admissions prodded the founding of the Massachusetts Society. Polly Welts Kaufman, “Girls’ Latin School,” in Historical Dictionary of Women’s Education in the United States, ed. Linda Eisenmann (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998), 172.
Mrs. Warren was best known for her leadership of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society. She often chaired the Executive Committee. She was the first recording secretary for the WFMS, and “the first corresponding secretary of the New England Branch.” Her preeminent role was as Editor from 1869 of *Heathen Woman’s Friend*, the periodical of the WFMS. She wrote monthly editorials, kept up a voluminous correspondence, and was well-known as a superb writer. At the time of her death in 1893, *Heathen Woman’s Friend* was a successful 24-page monthly, with 21,500 subscribers, and had never lost money.

The periodical contained reports of women’s mission work from around the world, news about women’s church organization in the U.S., profiles of international women leaders, and articles about women’s progress everywhere—including such new movements as the deaconess and women’s temperance movements. It launched a systematic study program for lay women that became the model for the interdenominational women’s mission study program in 1900. In retrospect, historians consider *Heathen Woman’s Friend* one of the most important women’s periodicals in American history. In addition, Mrs. Warren founded a children’s missionary periodical, a German-language women’s mission magazine (which she also edited for a time), and women’s periodicals in three different Indian languages.

In her work for the education and empowerment of women, Mrs. Warren had the staunch support of her husband, the President of Boston University. He and the other husbands of the founders supported the WFMS when it was attacked by conservatives in the church at the General Conference of 1884. He even wrote bad poetry for his wife’s periodical, signed under the initials “W.F.W.” and “Boston University.” His poem “W.F.M.S.” appeared in the January, 1895 issue of *Heathen Woman’s Friend*, two years after the death of his beloved wife:

Vine of the Lord, thy top is where?
As high as soar the wings of prayer,

How wide extend thy branches green?
From West to East, o’er all between . . .

Life-giving fruit, thou bear’st and good?
It feeds Earth’s new-born womanhood.

Vine of the Lord, thy root is where?
In Jesu’s love and woman’s care.”

44 William F. Warren, “Argument of President Warren on the admission of girls to Boston Latin School,” (published photocopy in possession of author, 8 pages). Although the quest for coeducational Latin education failed, the Boston Latin Academy was subsequently founded for girls.


46 Gracey, “Our Translated Leader,” 214.

47 On the ecumenical women’s missionary movement, including the collaborative mission study program, see Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission*, ch. 6.

In April, 1895, Bishop Edwin Parker and other missionary friends of Harriet Warren laid a commemorative stone in India, naming Lucknow College the Harriet Warren Memorial. Thus for a few years, the name of Harriet Warren—and her advocacy for women’s education, empowerment, and missions—was attached to the first women’s college in all of Asia.  

**Conclusion**

In March of 2019, commemorative windows from the WFMS historic site and official United Methodist Heritage Landmark at Tremont Street Church were installed in the library of the Boston University School of Theology. Dedicated with a liturgy to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the WFMS, the windows had been removed from the defunct church before it was turned into condos. The historic windows honor the lives of specific women. But for the married women, their contributions and even names are hidden under the identities of their husbands: Mrs. Edwin Parker, Mrs. William F. Warren, Mrs. William Butler, Mrs. Osmon Baker, and so forth.

By installing the WFMS Founders’ windows at the School of Theology, it becomes impossible to segregate the history of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society from that of Boston University. Their collaboration in the spring of 1869 represented the public identity of New England Methodists, who together supported higher education for both men and women, women’s empowerment in church and society, and global outreach. The history shows that while men and women’s histories can be told separately, they should not be compartmentalized. The 150th anniversary of the chartering of Boston University, and the founding of the WFMS, belong together.

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49 Florence Perrine Mansell, “The Harriet Warren Memorial,” *The Heathen Woman’s Friend* (April 1895), 272. The new college building took the name Harriett Warren Memorial—a name that seems to have been used co-terminously with Lucknow Woman’s College. See “The Ecumenical Conference,” *Life and Light for Woman* (May 1900), 222. After the death of Isabella Thoburn, Lucknow Woman’s College was renamed after her. Harriet Warren Hall may have become the college chapel some years later.

50 See the online exhibit of the windows “In Mission to Boston and the World: 150 Years of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society” [https://motiveart.omeka.net/exhibits/show/inmissiontobostonandtheworld/home](https://motiveart.omeka.net/exhibits/show/inmissiontobostonandtheworld/home). Special thanks go to Kara Jackman for construction of the exhibit.