

## Chapter 6

# BLACKS AND THE AMERICAN MISSIONARY ASSOCIATION

Clara Merritt DeBoer

Clara Merritt DeBoer is a writer and teacher. This chapter is based on a doctoral dissertation she completed at Rutgers University, 1973, *The Role of Afro-Americans in the Origin and Work of the American Missionary Association: 1839—1877.*

THE AVERAGE AMERICAN HISTORY STUDENT learns about William Lloyd Garrison and the Quakers as the leaders of the antislavery cause. How many hear about the “evangelical” abolitionists or the American Missionary Association (AMA) and its predecessors, the Amistad Committee and the Union Missionary Society (UMS), covering the years 1839 to 1878? Garrison’s periodical, *The Liberator*, had perhaps two thousand subscribers at its height, whereas *The American Missionary*, organ of the AMA, was read by twenty thousand church members. Garrison’s repute is helped by the glowing biography written of him by his children and by the fact that *The Liberator* was preserved by the Boston Public Library and has been available for reading during these one hundred plus years.

The AMA had no central repository for its archives. Its papers were sent to Fisk University, where they were stored in a room with an open window. Ten percent of them were destroyed by weather. In 1969 the papers were removed from Fisk for microfilming and were then housed temporarily in the newly created Amistad Research Center, which occupied several rooms of the Dillard University library, in New Orleans. In 1973 the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries relinquished control of the Center to a private board, on which it maintains only a minority presence.

The AMA was founded by leaders of both races who had much in common: All were political abolitionists, members of the Liberty and the Free Soil parties; all were opposed to colonization (the return of blacks to Africa); and all were church members of liberal communions. Most of the whites were Congregationalists. The blacks were Congregational or Presbyterian ministers. All believed in the equality of the races and insisted on integration in their activities. In this they stand in contrast to Garrison and his followers, who talked and wrote much about freeing the slaves but used blacks only in servile positions in the office or as oratorical performers on the lecture circuit. Even most of the Quakers, who historically have high marks as antislavery workers, were not comfortable enough in their race relations to admit black members into their societies.

Among its officers and members the AMA counted persons of stature in public and private life:

the vice president of the United States, the governors of Massachusetts and of Connecticut, members of Congress, ministers of the gospel, and a state supreme court justice, all of whom were white. Its black members included newspaper editors and publishers, leaders of the Negro Convention movement, authors, members of Congress, ministers of the gospel, and a state supreme court justice— “men of mark,” as Lewis Tappan called them.

The AMA was established because two older ecumenical bodies, the American Home Missionary Society (AHMS) and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), refused to take forthright stands against slavery and accepted contributions from slaveholders. In addition to missions in Africa, Hawaii, Siam, Jamaica, and Egypt as well as among the American Indians, the immigrant Chinese, and the poor whites of the United States, the AMA founded more than five hundred schools and colleges for the freedmen of the South during and after the Civil War, spending more money for that purpose than the Freedman’s Bureau of the federal government.(1) Just to name some of the schools in which the AMA played a major role is to see the scope of its influence in the field of education in the South: Howard University, Berea College, Hampton Institute, Atlanta University, Fisk University, Straight (now Dillard) University, Tougaloo College, Talladega College, LeMoyne (now LeMoyne-Owen) College, Tillotson (now Huston-Tillotson) College, Avery Institute.

This was the gift of New England to the freed Negro; not alms, but a friend; not cash, but character. It was not and is not money these seething millions want, but love and sympathy. . . which once saintly souls brought to their favored children in the crusade of the sixties, that finest thing in American History, and one of the few things untainted by sordid greed and cheap vainglory. The teachers in these institutions came not to keep the Negroes in their place, but to raise them out of the places of defilement where slavery had wallowed them. The colleges they founded were social settlements; homes where the best of the sons of the freedmen came in close and sympathetic touch with the best traditions of New England. They lived and ate together, studied and worked, hoped and hearkened in the dawning light. In actual formal content their curriculum was doubtless old-fashioned, but in educational power it was supreme, for it was the contact of living souls.(2)

To tell the story of the AMA fully is to explore its New England heritage and the minds of those, like Tappan, who were instrumental in its origins: the influence of Charles G. Finney and the distinctive revivalism associated with him and with Congregationalism; the influences of Oneida Institute, Yale University, and Oberlin; the interaction of liberal nineteenth-century theology and radical abolitionism. It is also to tell the story of many black Americans who worked for the cause of Christian freedom and justice.

Although the AMA was not begun primarily for black persons, more of them served on its board and were commissioned by it than is true of any other predominantly white benevolent

organization. More than five hundred black persons—officers, teachers, and missionaries—can be identified (not always easy in view of the color-blind nature of the AMA) among the AMA workers during the period covered by the archives. This remarkable record was achieved because of the uncompromising belief in freedom and equality on the part of the founders of the AMA.(3)

Most of the great black heroes of the nineteenth century had at least some relationship with the AMA. Even Frederick Douglass, who was aided in publishing his paper by officers of the AMA and who often worshiped in the First Congregational Church of Washington, DC, although castigating other benevolent organizations for their paternalism, excepted the AMA and described it as a “society honestly laboring to disseminate light and hope amongst us.”

## **AMISTAD INCIDENT**

In the spring of 1839 African slavers kidnapped and sold a group of their compatriots to a Portuguese trader, who transported them in irons to Havana, Cuba, and resold them. Thus began the celebrated Amistad incident.(4) Fifty-four of the slaves mutinied, murdered some of the crew, and caused the remainder to sail into Long Island Sound and the jurisdiction of the American courts. New England antislavery forces rallied to form a committee to cover court costs and help the Africans return to their homeland. Before it ended the affair involved Presidents Martin Van Buren and John Tyler, former President John Quincy Adams (who acted as defense attorney in the final appeal before the Supreme Court), the possibility of war with Spain, and the establishment of the Mendi Mission in Africa. The Amistad Committee—Lewis Tappan, Simeon Smith Jocelyn, and Joshua Leavitt—chosen after the adjournment of a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, raised the funds for the care of the Africans and for their trials.(5)

The effort and the money that were expended turned out to be good investments. The Amistad case was not only a propellant for the antislavery cause, but also something more: Coming as it did at the time of schism in the American Anti-Slavery Society, it provided Tappan and the evangelical abolitionists with a new direction for the war on slavery and a national voice with which to address church members and speak for them. (This was particularly important for the Congregationalists whose denomination had no national organization until the start of the Congregational Union, in 1854.)

Tappan, New York merchant and transplanted New England Congregationalist, was the organizational genius of the abolition movement. He gave the AMA its spirit, its name, and his services as treasurer without pay for nineteen years. This magnificent American, for whom no definitive biography exists, lived his Christian faith although his life was threatened, his home ransacked and his possessions burned, and he was forced out of his church. He taught an integrated Sunday school and advocated integrated public schools in the belief that blacks and whites could know each other as adults only if they grew up together. When one of the Mendi

(Africa) missionaries wrote to the “Rooms” in New York asking what the AMA officers would think if he were to marry an African woman, Tappan’s answer was, “White or black, whom God puts together let no man put asunder.” Small wonder that such a man and his fellow workers attracted leading black abolitionists to the AMA.(6)

## **UNION MISSIONARY SOCIETY**

Prompted by the plight of the Amistad Africans on trial in his own state, James William Charles Pennington, pastor of the Talcott Street Congregational Church (black), in Hartford, Connecticut, issued a call for a Missionary Convention of black persons to consider the needs of Africa “because the exigencies of that country are great” and “because we are desirous that something should be done by us for the land which our fathers loved as the land of their nativity.” The time was right, for blacks had no missionary society and Christian duty demanded that they follow the Great Commission of Jesus.

Blacks like Pennington who overcame the enormous infirmities of slavery gave abolitionists irrefutable evidence of their equality. Pennington had no known white ancestors. When he escaped slavery, at age twenty-one, he could not read, yet within five years he was an accredited teacher at New Town, Long Island. After his escape he worked during the day and studied at night to make up for the deprivation his mind had suffered in childhood. To prepare himself for the Christian ministry he went to New Haven. Pennington lacked the educational qualifications to enter Yale Seminary as a student but was allowed to audit courses. At the same time he served the Temple Street Congregational Church (founded by Simeon Smith Jocelyn and later served by Amos Gerry Beman), having been licensed in 1838. Two years later he began his work as pastor of the Talcott Street Congregational Church of Hartford.

The convention that created the Union Missionary Society (UMS) in Hartford, on August 18, 1841, was composed “chiefly” of “people of color” from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania. Pennington was chosen president; the Rev. Amos Gerry Beman of New Haven, corresponding secretary; the Rev. Theodore Sedgwick Wright of New York, treasurer; and the Rev. Josiah Brewer (who was white) of Wethersfield, Connecticut, chairman of the executive committee. Tappan was elected to an office in absentia but declined. He did not think the time was right to enter into competition with the ABCFM. He still hoped that the foreign mission board would be persuaded to denounce slavery. Lewis, his brother Arthur, and many other abolitionists were convinced that the means for defeating slavery lay in the institutions of evangelical Protestantism. Slavery could not stand for one hour, they said, if the churches denounced it.

The Amistad Committee agreed to sever its ties with the Africans and turn over its funds to the ABCFM, “provided assurance was given that it should be an anti-slavery mission” to be founded when the Africans were returned home. The Board declined the offer, and three New York abolitionists found themselves—rather reluctantly—in the missionary business. The group of

missionaries sent to Africa with the Amistads included a black man and his wife under the care of the UMS. Tappan wanted the new mission to be headed by Pennington, but Pennington could not be persuaded to accept the position. His congregation had doubled in the year he had served it, but he feared what would happen if he left so soon. And he was also the president of the infant UMS, which would “need much labor to make it go.” At its first annual meeting, in 1842, the UMS absorbed the Amistad Committee. This time Tappan accepted the office of corresponding secretary, but the organization was still predominantly black, with few sources of funds and little interest shown in it by most white abolitionists.

### **AMERICAN MISSIONARY ASSOCIATION FOUNDED**

The action that finally prompted evangelical abolitionists to found a missionary society of the “whole gospel” took place two weeks before the Liberty Party convention in 1845. The ABCFM issued a statement to the effect that it was against slavery but would not direct its missionaries among the American Indian tribes to refuse church membership to Indians who owned slaves. One hundred people—one tenth of those at the convention—held a special meeting and decided on action. They reluctantly chose to start another missionary society in the place of those they had long sustained with their gifts. They determined that it would be democratically organized, unlike the old societies, whose boards were self-perpetuating and independent of their supporters.

After an initial meeting in Albany, part of the so-called burnt-over district and birthplace of so many nineteenth-century enthusiasms, the AMA was born in 1846.

### **BLACK LEADERSHIP BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR**

Of the twelve men who served on the first board of the AMA four were Afro-Americans: Theodore S. Wright, Samuel Ringgold Ward, James Pennington, and Charles Bennett Ray. In later years Samuel E. Cornish, Henry Highland Garnet, Amos N. Freeman, and Sella Martin also served as officers. They were unusual men. Each had taken full advantage of the grudging opportunities afforded his race for education in the North. And having secured that hard-won prize for himself, each entered the fight to secure the blessings of education and first-class citizenship for all his race. Most of them had edited newspapers at some period of their lives, and all contributed widely to black and abolitionist publications. Although their lives were quickened by the urgency of the larger task, with the exception of Cornish, their purposes were tempered by the necessity of earning enough money to support their families. Their towers were neither covered with ivy nor made of ivory. These men were in the ranks daily, battling for and among their fellows.

Ray and Wright were free-born New Englanders. Freeman may have been as well, for he was ordained in Maine in 1841 and served the Fourth Congregational Church in Portland. Ray and

Tappan were two of the founders of an integrated church in New York. Ray also served the AMA as auditor and as urban missionary in New York City, starting another Congregational church there. In 1828 Wright graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary, the first black person to receive a theological degree in the United States. He was a fervent critic of the colonization scheme. His time on the AMA executive committee ended with his death, in 1847.

Cornish was born in Delaware and educated in Philadelphia. He founded the First Colored Presbyterian Church in New York in 1822 and served it until Wright became its minister, in 1828. Later, as Shiloh Presbyterian Church, it and its minister removed to the Free School Presbytery. Cornish was an editor of the first black newspaper in America and remained a vice president of the AMA until his death, in 1858.

Pennington, Garnet, and Ward were slaves who escaped from Maryland. Garnet and Ward were brought north by their parents as young children. Garnet, second (perhaps) only to Frederick Douglass in leadership among black Americans, was a magnificent orator. In 1865, on the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, he was the first black person to address Congress. He died in Liberia in 1882, having been appointed U.S. Minister by President James A. Garfield, who served the AMA as trustee of Hampton Institute.

Ward was a home missionary of the AMA as well as a member of the executive committee. During the time he was one of the managers of the UMS he served the Congregational church at South Butler, New York. This church was well known for its progressive leadership. In 1853 it was the first church in a major American denomination to ordain a woman. Still later it sent the AMA its first superintendent to work among freed slaves.

Martin was born in North Carolina. His father was also his owner. He grew up in urban areas and managed to learn to read. Unlike most escapees, Martin made his way north from the deep South when he was twenty-three. His escape did not come until 1855, five years after the Fugitive Slave Law had wrought such havoc in the lives of Ward, Pennington, and Garnet, all of whom were forced to flee the country. Garnet left his position as a home missionary for the AMA, commissioned to start integrated Congregational churches in New York State, to flee to Great Britain and then on to Jamaica as a missionary of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland (antislavery and not the established church). Pennington went to Great Britain. Under AMA auspices Ward chose to go to the Canadian West, because the AMA thought this field was the most difficult in its home mission work. He started a newspaper for the black refugees who were there, and then he also went to Great Britain.

Not all the AMA home missionaries before the Civil War were men. The most interesting of the women and probably the most “temperamental” of them all—men or women—was Mary Ann Shadd Cary. She eventually became one of the first black women lawyers in North America, but before that she took over Samuel Ward's paper in the Canadian West and became the first woman editor, white or black. The AMA found her to be both an able teacher of the fugitive slaves and a worthy opponent in disputes. She took on the eminent black men of her time,

including Frederick Douglass, in the surviving portions of her newspaper. She also challenged the men at AMA headquarters for their lack of faith in her dedication to integrated schools. Despite her vitriolic attacks in letters and in her paper, the AMA recognized her ability. She later worked for the association at the Lincoln School, in Washington, DC.

## **SCHOOLS FOR FREED SLAVES**

The coming of the war found the AMA ready and in place with a decade and a half of experience as a missionary society. AMA missionaries and teachers followed the Union armies, establishing schools wherever and as soon as the military situation permitted. That the freedmen were taught by New England schoolmarm was a myth. True, a number of the teachers were women, but fully a third were men. Many came from New England, but a large number also came from New York, Michigan, Ohio, and elsewhere. Most important: Some of them, men and women, were black. Some, like their white counterparts, had received their higher education at Oberlin College, remarkable in its day for its acceptance of blacks and women.

Men or women, black or white, what courage they needed! And what stamina! Ignored, insulted, hated by the white population, they persevered through disease and terror and suffered many hardships. Refused housing by whites, they often shared the poor homes and poverty of black families. All week they taught: children in the daytime; classes at night for the adults; sewing, homemaking, and manual arts on Saturday; Sunday school on the sabbath. They worked when yellow fever, dengue, malaria, typhoid, and tuberculosis were scourges everywhere. Some died; some never fully recovered from fever contracted while in AMA service. The worst disease of all, however, was the prejudice and hate of the whites in the South. Letters in the archives document the shocking record. Male teachers were beaten and warned to leave or be killed. Some disappeared. Their schools were burned and they rebuilt them with their own hands. They started orphanages for black children and adopted some of the orphans themselves. The first teacher of the freedmen was one hired by the AMA. She was a woman but not a Yankee schoolmarm. Mary Smith Peake was a free citizen of the state of Virginia. She was born Mary Smith Kelsey in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1823. Her father was a white “Englishman of rank and culture” and her mother, a free mulatto. Thus a black woman had the honor of teaching the first day school for the freedmen. Her school in the Brown Cottage was the seed from which Hampton Institute would grow.

Mary Peake’s school included more than fifty children during the day and twenty adults at night. She became seriously ill but would not rest. On Washington’s birthday in 1862 she died of tuberculosis. AMA secretary Simeon Smith Jocelyn called her a saint, and Brown Cottage became a sacred place.

Even when one discounts the Victorian’s love of sentiment, one is awed by the evidence of affection bestowed on Mary Peake after her death. Two ministers wrote accounts of her life for publication. A brigade surgeon wrote an eulogy, and a regimental doctor wrote a poetic tribute.

The Rev. Lewis C. Lockwood, AMA superintendent at Fortress Monroe, wrote that Mrs. Peake was missed “more and more” each day and that “she was indeed a queen among her kind.” He had learned that the home and its furnishings that she had lost in the fire at Hampton almost equalled “the best in that aristocratic place.” Yet she had been content to live in one room above the school, which Lockwood likened to the upper room of the Last Supper. She had erected to herself a “monument more enduring than brass or granite, by impressing her own image upon a group of susceptible pupils,” in whom she would live again. “We never shall see her like again.”

Until the AMA schools raised up their own teachers about 5 percent of the AMA workers were blacks. They were special folk indeed. They had acquired an education when most colleges were closed to blacks and women. At one point all the AMA teachers in Maryland were black women, an experiment to show how capable black women were. The idea was dropped immediately, however, lest white Southerners use it as evidence that black teachers and white teachers were incompatible. The names of these women do not appear in published histories. One of them was Edmonia Highgate, who, at nineteen, was already the principal of a school in Binghamton, New York. She and her family were members of Plymouth Church in Syracuse. Highgate had taught at Norfolk, Virginia; Darlington, Maryland; and New Orleans, Louisiana. In New Orleans she publicly attacked the school board for its segregation policies. Her students were fired on while they were on their way to school and so was her classroom while in session.

Before going to Louisiana, Highgate persuaded the AMA to make her their collecting agent, allowing her to send half of her receipts to the school taught by her mother, in Mississippi, and the other half to the AMA general fund. In the 1860s it was still an unusual occupation for any woman to travel about New York, New England, and Lower Canada, addressing meetings and raising money. For a woman of color to do it successfully says much about the AMA and Edmonia Highgate. She died while she was still young. The cause of her death remains unknown.

Two men who were products of the Mendi Mission in Africa became in fact missionaries to the United States. Thomas De Saliere Tucker, grandson of an African chief, during his second year at Oberlin College, offered to be a teacher of the freedmen. He was sent to aid Charles P. Day, a white teacher at Fortress Monroe. Day and Tucker lived in what was, ironically, the former summer home of President Tyler, who had been unwilling or unable to persuade the U.S. Navy to provide homeward passage for the Amistad Africans. Tucker did a credible job of teaching until he fell in love with a freed slave, Lucinda Spivery, who assisted in the Fortress Monroe school. This African aristocrat wrote the AMA that he did not think he should marry a woman that was so ignorant. Lewis Tappan probably made it possible for Lucinda to receive an education—as he did for so many black youth—because some years later she was a regular teacher and her letters show her competence. Tucker finished his work at Oberlin and taught school in Kentucky and in Louisiana, where he edited several papers in New Orleans. He practiced law learned at Straight University and became the first president of Florida State Normal College, later Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, in Tallahassee.

Barnabas Root also was from the AMA Mendi Mission in Sierra Leone. Having graduated from Knox College in 1870 and from Chicago Theological Seminary in 1873, Root became a teacher and missionary among the freedmen. Unlike Tucker, Root's heart remained in Africa, and he returned in 1875. The Mendi missionaries died with such horrifying regularity that at one point Tappan called himself a murderer for sending women to that mission. The AMA always hoped that black Americans could withstand African diseases better than whites could. But Root, even though he was a child of Africa, did not survive long in Sierra Leone; he died in 1877. He spent his last days trying to finish a Mende language dictionary, which, along with his other books, formed the basis of a student library. In 1877 the AMA sent an all-black staff of missionaries to Mendi. All were graduates of AMA schools.

Another AMA gift to the world is the high regard in which the Negro spiritual is held today. The young black persons of the AMA colleges wanted to rid themselves of everything associated with slavery, including the old slave songs of their parents and grandparents. It took the appreciation of musicians like Adam K. Spence, principal of Fisk, and George L. White, who directed the world-famous Fisk Jubilee Singers, to give the spiritual its place in America's music.

Because of having to begin with teaching the alphabet, AMA "universities" originally contained everything from the first grade through provisions for graduate studies in law, medicine, and theology. But standards were not lowered. The first collegiate degrees awarded to black persons in the South were earned by two men and one woman at Fisk in 1875, almost ten years after Fisk was opened in a deserted army barracks hospital in Nashville, Tennessee. Not until twenty-six years after Talladega College was founded were its first A.B. degrees awarded, although many teaching certificates were given during those years.

In 1916 the U.S. Bureau of Education praised the AMA: "No denominational schools surpass those of this group in educational standards or administrative efficiency. It is probable that no church board has equaled this association in the thoroughness of its self-examination."(7)

## **BLACK CHURCHES**

The AMA started more than schools, however. An integral part of the United Church of Christ are the churches the AMA established alongside the schools. If a church in the South is named First Congregational and was founded during Reconstruction, it is generally a predominantly black church started by the AMA. At first no thought was given to transporting Congregationalism to the freedmen. Although the AMA received most of its support from Congregationalists, it was nonsectarian. In fact, the Wesleyan Methodists and Freewill Baptists preceded the National Council of Congregational Churches in officially recognizing the AMA as their "special instrumentality for reaching the freedmen." The AMA commissioned teachers of most denominations, requiring only that the teachers be "evangelical" Christians (a term that then still belonged to mainline Protestantism) without racial prejudice.

From the beginnings of the AMA—long before the Civil War—its leaders had hoped for and yet feared the freedom they worked so hard to attain. Freeing four million slaves meant dispersing throughout the country four million persons whose experience at the hands of the slaveholders had inculcated insincerity, cunning, dependency, and self-hate. Education, said the AMA, was not enough. In fact, an educated amoral person was more of a threat to society than an uneducated one. The Christian religion was as important a gift to the freedmen as education was. And having found the black churches of the slave states wanting in moral training and leadership, the AMA started churches as adjuncts to their schools. In this—as in all its work—the AMA was intent on preparing the former slaves to enter the mainstream of American life.

### Notes

1. Richard Bryant Drake, “The American Missionary Association and the Southern Negro, 1861—1888” (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1957), 198.
2. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Milwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1973); italics added.
3. For the story of the American Missionary Association with an emphasis on what black persons did in and through it, see Clara Merritt DeBoer, ‘The Role of Afro-Americans in the Origin and Work of the American Missionary Association: 1839—1877’ (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1973).
4. William A. Owens, *Black Mutiny: The Revolt of the Schooner Amistad* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1968).
5. For the best general picture of AMA work before the Civil War, see Clifton Herman Johnson, “The American Missionary Association, 1846—1861: A Study of Christian Abolitionism” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1959).
6. Clara Merritt DeBoer, “Lewis Tappan: Advocate of the Whole Gospel,” AD. magazine, November 1977.
7. U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education, Bulletin 1916, No. 38.