

Archives Unbound: Evangelism and the Syria-Lebanon Mission: Correspondence of the Board of Foreign Missions, 1869-1910



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The records of the Board of Foreign Missions provide invaluable information on social conditions in Greater Syria (and Lebanon) and on efforts to spread the gospel during the nineteenth century. Documenting the church's educational, evangelical, and medical work, these are records mainly of incoming correspondence from the mission field and outgoing correspondence from the Board headquarters.

The establishment in 1837 of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.'s (PCUSA) Board of Foreign Missions (BFM) signalled the beginning of a worldwide missionary operation destined to embrace approx. fifteen countries located on four different continents. Presbyterian interest in foreign missions however predated the creation of the BFM by almost three-quarters of a century.



Throughout much of the nineteenth century, the BFM directed the church's foreign as well as some domestic missionary activities. Before 1870, foreign missions were established in Africa, Brazil, China, Colombia, India, Japan, and Thailand. Following the reunion of the Old/New School denominations in 1870, the BFM absorbed the ABCFM's mission work in Iran, Iraq, and Syria and expanded its own operation.

The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.'s foreign missionary enterprise in the nineteenth century was responsible for the establishment of indigenous churches, a variety of educational facilities, hospitals, orphanages, seminaries, and other institutions that reflected the church's educational, medical and evangelical ministry.

The Syria Mission

American Protestant work in Greater Syria dates from 1819, when Pliny Fisk and Levi Parsons, representatives of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) arrived in Smyrna with the objective of initiating missionary work in the Jerusalem area. Following the reunion of Old School and New School Presbyterian Churches in the US in 1870, the ABCFM's Syria-Lebanon Mission was transferred to the Board of Foreign Missions.

The conflict between Christian and Muslim—a dominant and recurring theme throughout Syria's history—presented the Mission with a diversity of problems unknown in other mission fields. The division of the population along religious lines resulted in internecine warfare throughout Syria/Lebanon. This had an unsettling effect on the mission's educational, medical and evangelistic work. Despite this turmoil, the Mission was able to effect progress, especially in the area of educational and medical assistance. Schools and medical work were a part of the Christian enterprise in Syria throughout the Mission's history. Such institutions as the American School for Girls, the Syrian Protestant College (later known as the American University of Beirut), the Tripoli Girls' School, and the Gerald Institute manifested the Church's educational ministry in Syria. Medical work was carried on in three centres: the Hamlin Memorial Sanitarium for tubercular patients; the Kennedy Memorial Hospital in Tripoli; and the Deir-ez-Zore Hospital in the remote northern desert.

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The work of the Presbyterian Church in Syria was conducted through four main stations. These included Beirut, occupied in 1823; Tripoli, opened in 1848; and Sidon, occupied in 1851. The last station, Aleppo, was opened by the Board of Foreign Missions in 1920. In addition to these four stations and their sixty-three outstations, there were several substations. Suk-el-Garb, started by the American Board in 1848, was part of the Beirut station, as was Zahleh. Hama and Deir-ez-Zore were both substations of the Aleppo station. The work of the Syria Mission transcended three distinct states: Lebanon, which encompassed the stations of Beirut, Tripoli and Sidon and the substation of Zahleh; Latakia, where the Mission performed limited work in certain villages; and Syria, where work was conducted in the cities of Hama, Aleppo and Deir-ez-Zore.

Documenting the evangelistic, educational and medical mission of the BFM in Syria-Lebanon, this collection provides researchers with a unique view into the turbulent political forces that dominated Syria and Lebanon's history during the 19th century, and illustrates the difficulty of conducting mission work in an environment of religious tensions and conflict.

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