



Headquarters of the first tract and missionary society, South Lancaster, Massachusetts, c. 1880.

Photo courtesy of Loma Linda University Photo Archive; Dept. of Archives and Special Collections, Loma Linda University

# International Tract and Missionary Society

---

## GERALD WHEELER

Gerald Wheeler, M.A. in religion (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan) and M.A.L.S. (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan), served the church for more than 47 years as an editor, first at Southern Publishing Association in Nashville, Tennessee, then at the Review and Herald Publishing Association, Hagerstown, Maryland, after its merger with Southern. He retired as head book editor. Wheeler has written numerous articles and books, including biographies on James White (2003) and Stephen Nelson Haskell (2016). He contributed to the first revised edition of the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1976) and *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (2013) and continues to edit for denominational publishing entities.

---

Originating in 1870, the Tract and Missionary Societies (sometimes called Book and Tract Societies) became, during the subsequent three decades, the main distribution agency for denominational publications and the organizational vehicle for personal ministries.

## Context

The Tract and Missionary societies adapted what was then cutting-edge marketing approaches introduced into the United States by British publishers as well as secular American authors and publishers. Although publishing has been a major force in both American secular and religious life, it had many obstacles to overcome. While the nineteenth-century saw many technological breakthroughs, such as steam-powered printing presses and inexpensive wood pulp-based paper, publishing struggled with the lack of an American distribution system. Newspapers could circulate through the mail, but not books. Even the postal network itself was quite limited. People in most areas had to go to a post office, usually in a general store, to pick up their mail. The recipient, not the sender, had to pay the postage. Even as late as 1887, a town had to have a population of 10,000 to qualify for free home delivery. In 1890, three-quarters of the American people still had to get their mail at a post office. Not until 1906 did the postal system establish the basic structure of rural free delivery.<sup>1</sup>

The United States had few bookstores except in larger and older cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Books were expensive and bookstores catered to intellectuals, not the ordinary person. Those general stores that did sell books carried only a limited range of titles, primarily practical items such as Bibles, hymnals, school primers, almanacs, and cookbooks. Nor could one order books by mail. The United States postal system did not have the legal right to deliver packages until January 1, 1913.<sup>2</sup> Publishers would have to ship books as ordinary freight on the limited stage coach routes, boats, or the developing railroad system.

Yet, American religion had long depended heavily on the printed page. The Millerite movement developed a strong tradition of publishing periodicals and tracts that passed down to the emerging Seventh-day Adventist Church. James White, with the encouragement of his wife, Ellen White, began the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* and other periodicals. Eventually he compiled articles from the journals into tracts and books. But the only way he had to sell them was to carry along trunks filled with them during his constant travels. That was cumbersome and limited to where he or other church representatives traveled. A large proportion of church members were isolated from any Adventist center and found it difficult to attend camp meetings or other gatherings.

## The Vigilant Missionary Society

During the late 1860s, Mary E. Haskell, wife of Stephen Nelson Haskell, formed a prayer group with three other women in South Lancaster, Massachusetts, that met every Wednesday to pray for their children, neighbors, and former members of the Millerite movement. Seeing what they were accomplishing, Stephen Haskell encouraged

the group to establish the Vigilant Missionary Society. It was the denomination's first lay-organized ministry, formally organized on June 8, 1869. Roxie Rice was president and Mary Haskell vice president.

During Vigilant Missionary Society's first year, membership increased to ten women who distributed a thousand pages of pamphlets. Soon, at their own expense, they began mailing hundreds of tracts and booklets, first throughout New England, then to foreign countries. They also managed to place Adventist books into local public libraries.<sup>3</sup> In addition, they wrote letters to individuals they believed might be interested in Adventist teachings. One woman learned French and another German so that they could reach non-English speaking people. The new organization was thus both an evangelistic society and a way of distributing Adventist publications.

## New England Tract and Missionary Society

To expand the concept, Stephen Haskell encouraged the women to establish a conference-wide Tract and Missionary Society<sup>4</sup> in the newly-formed New England Conference where he served as president. (He retained the Vigilant Missionary Society name for a woman's auxiliary.) Beginning on November 6, 1870, Haskell parceled the conference territory into districts and appointed a director for each one. The local director then selected a "librarian" who ordered publications with donations the local leader received to purchase and distribute the materials. He or she would then remit the funds to the district leader, who in turn, would every three months send it to the tract society office.

The idea was to have a society in each individual church or group of churches to promote the spread of Adventist publications as well as conduct the various personal ministries. The librarian would also present quarterly training sessions for each congregation-based unit. Continuing the Vigilant Missionary Society's goal of getting Seventh-day Adventist books in places where the public might encounter them, the Tract and Missionary Society sought to place at least three books "in all the best libraries in the conference."<sup>5</sup>

The tract societies also continued their personal ministries activities. They encouraged local congregations to emphasize personal ministries the fourth Sabbath of each month.

Upon hearing about the Tract and Missionary Society, James and Ellen White traveled to New England to study it. Both were impressed. Not only did James White quickly write about it, he convinced Haskell to accompany him back to Battle Creek, Michigan, to begin developing a greater distribution program. Ellen White was most interested in the correspondence ministry. She would later comment that she saw such correspondence as "drawing out the true feelings of friends who have received our papers and tracts."<sup>6</sup> She felt that the letters should seek a more personal relationship with the recipient while the accompanying publications would present the doctrinal content. Also, she saw such correspondence by women as appropriate and acceptable in the American culture of that time.

During March 1872, Haskell helped establish the New York Tract and Missionary Society, then presented the concept to that year's General Conference session. The conference appointed Haskell to urge other state conferences to form similar societies. James White published a book that endorsed such organizations.<sup>7</sup>

## Nationwide Organization

The 1873 General Conference asked Haskell to visit all state conferences and voted a General Tract and Missionary Society to coordinate both the state and local societies. It was formally organized in 1874 with James White as president and Stephen Haskell as business agent. George I. Butler was vice president and Maria Huntley the treasurer, assisted by Jennie Thayer. Ellen G. White was greatly interested in what Haskell was doing to promote the printed page and wrote him an extensive discussion of the topic.<sup>8</sup>

Given the endorsement of church leadership, Haskell threw himself into the activities of the tract societies. For a time, the organization published a monthly periodical, *The True Missionary*. The magazine printed reports and letters dealing with society activities and contacts, provided instruction on how to operate the local units, offered promotional programs, and encouraged members with motivational articles.

In 1876, Haskell became president of the General Tract and Missionary Society. Since he already had a number of societies in operation, he now focused on maintaining the initial enthusiasm and dealing with unpaid accounts. He encouraged church members to continue in the program and helped them to raise funds to erase a local society's indebtedness to the publishing house.

## The International Tract Society

Soon the various societies were distributing nearly five million pages of material each year, resulting in as many converts as produced by the traditional evangelistic preaching series. The General Tract and Missionary Society established a fund-raising program to send bundles of tracts not only in the United States, but around the world. Ship captains would take printed material to distant ports and leave it on the docks. Seventh-day Adventism began in many countries as a result of someone finding and reading the publications. In addition to the English language, tracts and periodicals began to appear in Swedish, French, German, Italian, and other languages.

The 1882 annual meeting of the Society in Rome, New York, changed the organization's name to the International Tract and Missionary Society (often shortened to International Tract Society), reflecting the organization's growth. The British Tract and Missionary Society organized in 1880. Tract societies were organized in Australia in 1888 and in New Zealand in 1889. The International Tract Society set up depositories, distribution agencies, and even publishing houses in other countries. Several publishing houses, such as the Advent-Verlag of Hamburg, Germany, Stanborough Press in England, and the Oriental Watchman Publishing House of India

first operated under the International Tract Society name.<sup>9</sup>

## The Colporteur System

During the 1880s, the state tract societies would adapt and implement the colporteur system of door-to-door sales that secular publishers had developed and widely used in the United States for some time. Sales agents would go from home to home to solicit people to “subscribe” to a publication. Such marketing had become a large-scale business during the latter part on the nineteenth century. The customer would put a down payment on the item. Such “subscribing” enabled authors and publishers to raise funds to cover the initial costs of publication at a time when banks were few and reluctant to give loans to such questionable projects. Under such a system, the publisher would print the books when it had raised enough money.

The American artist and ornithologist John James Audubon used the subscription method when he could not obtain any other form of funding for his famous bird books. Subscription sales reached their peak after the American Civil War. The author Mark Twain was especially active in selling his works through the subscription method.

Like their commercial counterparts, and because of the continuing lack of a parcel post system, Adventist colporteurs had to personally deliver the books. In rural areas that usually took place in the fall when the farmers had harvested and sold their crops and had money to finish paying for the books. By 1886 the tract societies reported a door-to-door sales force of more than 400.<sup>10</sup>

At first Adventist colporteurs ordered their books directly from the Adventist publishing house. But as their sales territories spread further afield, it became more convenient to obtain them from the local tract society. Eventually the state societies assumed responsibility for all subscription sales in their territories. The tract society leaders then began recruiting and training the colporteurs themselves.

The tract and missionary societies also served as an early entering wedge for urban outreach, combining as they did both the distribution of publications and personal evangelism. They became an integral part of the formation of city missions during the 1880s. Unfortunately, the expense of such city missions eventually led to their general disappearance by the end of the decade.<sup>11</sup>

## Re-organization and Successors

Reflecting the American love of collecting statistics, Haskell created numerous reports and forms for the staff of the tract societies to fill out. That, along with the organizational and procedural structure that he developed, reached the point where Ellen White cautioned him that the societies had become so complicated and cumbersome that they had turned into a “yoke of bondage.” Instead of making things “work like a machine,” he should “cling more firmly to simplicity.”<sup>12</sup>

When the denomination began to grow rapidly at the end of the nineteenth century, the expanding ministries had become too extensive and varied to manage under a single umbrella organization. Church leadership dissolved the International Tract Society in 1901 and replaced it with a publishing committee that later became the General Conference Publishing Department. Then a series of re-organizations between 1902 and 1913 assigned tract publication to a new General Conference Publishing Department and shifted the societies' non-publishing activities to other organizations. Under the encouragement of Ellen White, who called for greater promotion of and new approaches to training members for personal ministries, the General Conference created the Home Missionary Department that would evolve into the current Sabbath School and Personal Ministries Department. By 1925, the conference tract societies resembled general book stores, though they continued to act as wholesalers for the colporteurs. The tract societies were re-named Book and Bible Houses, and later Adventist Book Centers.<sup>13</sup>

---

## SOURCES

Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Americans: The Democratic Experience*. New York: Vintage Books, 1973.

Haskell, S.N. "New Zealand." *ARH*, August 4, 1885.

Robinson, Ella M. *S.N. Haskell: Man of Action*. Brushton, N.Y.: TEACH Services, Inc. 2004.

Schwarz, Richard W. and Floyd Greenleaf. *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*. Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Department of Education, 2000.

*Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*. Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1887.

"Tract and Missionary Societies." *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2<sup>nd</sup>.rev. ed., 1996.

Wheeler, Gerald. *S.N. Haskell: Adventist Pioneer, Evangelist, Missionary, and Editor*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2016.

White, James. *An Appeal to the Working Men and Women in the Ranks of Seventh-day Adventists*. Battle Creek, MI.: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Pub. Assn., 1873.

White, Ellen G. *Instruction for Effective Christian Service*. Washington, D. C.: Home Missionary Department of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1947.

White, Ellen G. Ellen G. White to S. N. Haskell. October 12, 1875, Letter 1, 1975. Ellen G. White Estate.

White, Ellen G. Ellen G. White to S. N. Haskell. April 22, 1881, Letter 1, 1881. Ellen G. White Estate.

---

## NOTES

1. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 130-132.
2. *Ibid.*, 134.
3. Gerald Wheeler, *S.N. Haskell: Adventist Pioneer, Evangelist, Missionary, and Editor* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2016), 84-86.
4. On the development of the state tract societies, the General Tract and Missionary Society, and the International Tract and Missionary Society, see Wheeler, 84-89.
5. As Stephen later traveled around the world, he would stop by the public libraries in the cities he visited to see if any Adventist books had been donated to them. See, for example, S. N. Haskell, "New Zealand," *ARH*, August 4, 1885, 490.
6. Ellen G. White, *Instruction for Effective Christian Service* (Washington, D. C.: Home Missionary Department of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1947), 28.
7. James White, *An Appeal to the Working Men and Women in the Ranks of Seventh-day Adventists* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Pub. Assn., 1873).
8. Ellen G. White to S. N. Haskell, October 12, 1875, Letter 1, 1875, Ellen G. White Estate.
9. "Tract and Missionary Societies," *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2<sup>nd</sup>.rev. ed. (1996)
10. "Our Tract Societies—Summa[r]y of Labor for the Year Ending October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1886," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1887), 53.
11. Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Department of Education, 2000), 151-152.
12. Ellen G. White to S.N. Haskell, April 22, 1881, Letter 1, 1881, Ellen G. White Estate.
13. "Tract and Missionary Societies," *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2<sup>nd</sup>.rev. ed. (1996).

---

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000