

Missions to Native Americans

Protestant missions to the North American Indians began in the early 1600s in the Virginia colony and in New England. In the latter, Puritans had come to settle on land either bought and stolen from Native Americans in order to build religious communities and practice their faith without the government and societal persecution they had faced in Europe. In addition to seeking converts to Christianity, New England Puritan missionaries attempted to assimilate Indians to English customs and train them to become yeoman farmers. Presbyterian missionary David Brainerd (1718-1747) came out of the Puritan missionary tradition in Connecticut, but was also strongly influenced by the First Great Awakening that brought religious fervor and a wave of evangelism across the British colonies in the 1730s and 1740s.

The underlying assumption among early colonial Protestant missionaries was that Native American culture, language, and religion were inherently inferior to those of the English, and that the Indians should not only convert to Christianity but also give up their traditional ways in order to embrace the English way of life. Not surprisingly, many Native Americans resisted conversion to Christianity by missionaries that they viewed as part of the exploitative English colonial system. David Brainerd wrote about his interactions with Indians who declined to convert to Christianity for those and other reasons, such as their objection to white settlers' drunkenness, violence, and distribution of alcohol to the Indians. Many Indians did decide to convert to Christianity, however. For those who became Christians, conversion and the adoption of at least some English customs allowed for greater political and social autonomy and, in some cases, the retention of their land.

David Brainerd became famous after his death largely due to the work of his friend and supporter Jonathan Edwards, the renowned theologian and a central figure in the First Great Awakening. Brainerd has since become a figurehead for multiple groups and causes, especially evangelical Protestants and missionaries, who have lionized him for what they see as his self-sacrificing, devout, divinely inspired work among the Indians. More recently, historians have critiqued Brainerd's apparent lack of respect for and real interest in the Indians he worked to convert in his missionary years. These historians have also demonstrated his ineffectiveness, both as a missionary and as an advocate for Native Americans. In his complexity, and especially in the ways that he both followed and deviated from typical colonial missionary work, Brainerd is a helpful figure to examine in order to better understand early Protestant missions to the Native Americans.

Document 1: David Brainerd Diary

David Brainerd. *Mirabilia Dei inter Indicos, or, the Rise and Progress of a Remarkable Work of Grace amongst a Number of the Indians in the Provinces of New-Jersey and Pennsylvania...* Philadelphia: Printed and sold by William Bradford in Second Street, [1746].

PHS Call number: CR Amer 1746 E5748

**See especially pages 7-15, diary entry for July 21, 1745, documenting the baptism of Brainerd's interpreter, Moses Tinda Tautamy, and his wife. This document was printed using the "long s".*

Source note: David Brainerd (1718-1747) was a Presbyterian missionary who worked in Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey with members of the Seneca, Delaware, Six Nations, and Tutela tribes. Originally from Connecticut, Brainerd was inspired by the Great Awakening taking place in the 1730s and 1740s in the British colonies of North America. Brainerd was expelled from Yale Divinity School in 1741 for supporting revivalist principles and denigrating a Yale tutor, and in late 1742, he began working as a missionary for the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK). Brainerd set out in the spring of 1743 to try and convert Native Americans along the Delaware and Susquehanna rivers in the mid-Atlantic region. Critical to his moderate success as a missionary was his translator, Moses Tinda Tautamy (sometimes spelled "Tattamy"), who, along with his wife, converted to Christianity in 1745. A little over four years after beginning his missionary work, Brainerd died of tuberculosis, at age 29.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? When was it published?
2. How does Brainerd describe his Indian congregants early on in the account (page 7)? What was his attitude towards them, based on this account?
3. What were Brainerd's initial concerns about Moses Tinda Tautamy's desire to convert to Christianity (page 9)?
4. What was the deciding factor in Tautamy's choice to convert to Christianity, according to Brainerd (page 10)?
5. In what ways does Tautamy's conversion story as recounted by Brainerd reflect the Christian ideology of the Great Awakening?
6. What additional sources would be helpful for corroborating Brainerd's account of the conversion of Tautamy and his wife to Christianity?

Document 2: Ebenezer Pemberton Sermon

Pemberton, Ebenezer. *A Sermon Preach'd in New-Ark, June 12. 1744: at the Ordination of Mr. David Brainerd, a Missionary among the Indians ...With an Appendix, Touching the Indian Affairs.* Boston: Printed by Rogers and Fowle, for J. Pemberton, 1744.

PHS Call number: CR Amer 1744 E5471

**See especially pages 24-39, David Brainerd's letter to Ebenezer Pemberton, describing his work with the Indians, and including descriptions of Indian customs and traditions. This document was printed using the "long s".*

Source note: Ebenezer Pemberton (1704-1777) was a New Light minister in the Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches and was the only New York minister to invite George Whitefield, a major force in the Great Awakening, to preach to his congregation. This document is Pemberton's sermon from the ordination of David Brainerd, a Presbyterian missionary to the Indians of the mid-Atlantic region and author of *Mirabilia Dei inter Indicos* (Document 1). Brainerd first heard Pemberton preach in 1741 while he was a student at Yale University. He was inspired by Pemberton's emphasis on the importance of experiential faith rather than just scriptural knowledge.

Reading questions:

1. Who wrote this source? What was the author's purpose for writing it?
2. Why did the author choose to include the letter from David Brainerd in his sermon at Brainerd's ordination (page 24)?
3. How did Brainerd come to move from the home of a white settler family two miles away, to live among the Indians in their village (page 26)?
4. What specific methods did Brainerd use to introduce Christianity to the Indians (page 28)? Based on what you know of contemporary missions to Indians in the British colonies, were Brainerd's methods widely used?
5. Brainerd faces opposition to his missionary work at Minnissinks, on his way to his new post on the Delaware River (pages 32, 33). What objections do the Indians here have to Christianity and Brainerd's missionary work? How does Brainerd counter these objections?
6. Brainerd finds Sakhawotung, a settlement near a fork in the Delaware River, sparsely populated: "most of those that formerly belong'd here, are dispers'd, and remov'd to Places farther back in the Country" (page 33). Given the historical context, why had so many Indians left this settlement? Why would some Indians have stayed behind?
7. Based on this letter, how successful was Brainerd as a missionary, measured by conversions? What attitude do you think the Indians had toward Brainerd? What source(s) could help us learn more about the Indians' perspective?

Document 3: Harris Secondary Source

Harris, Paul. "David Brainerd and the Indians: Cultural Interaction and Protestant Missionary Ideology." *American Presbyterians* Vol. 72, No. 1 (1994): 1-9.

Source note: Paul Harris is an emeritus professor of history at Minnesota State University, Moorhead. With a focus on religious history, Harris has written papers on subjects such as whites and African Americans in the Methodist Church after the Civil War, and Christian missionaries in North and South America. This article appeared in *American Presbyterians*, a journal that is the predecessor publication of *The Journal of Presbyterian History*.

Reading questions:

1. Who wrote this source? What publication was it published in? Does the publication affect the source's reliability?
2. How do current views of David Brainerd differ from the views of Brainerd's contemporaries (page 1)?
3. In what ways was Brainerd's attitude toward the Indians he worked with complex and impossible to categorize as either fully racist or fully accepting/tolerant (page 4)?
4. Harris writes that Brainerd steered clear of "hell-fire preaching" in his work with the Indians, unlike many of his revivalist contemporaries (page 4). Is this observation supported or refuted by Brainerd's writings in Documents 1 and 2?
5. Who was Moses Tinda Tattamy (page 6)? How does Harris's description of Tattamy, and of his fellow Forks Delawares, add to or change what you read about Tattamy in Brainerd's writings? Why might Brainerd have downplayed Tattamy's influence among the Forks Delawares?
6. How did Brainerd fail at building an Indian settlement in Cranbury (page 7)?
7. In what ways did Brainerd set a precedent for colonialist, culturally insensitive Christian mission work (page 8)?