

The Children's Mission Ship

The 1856 American Board Mission to Micronesia and the Making of a New American West

ABSTRACT With money raised from children, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions purchased a ship in 1856 to support a mission to Micronesia. Drawing from children's literature, newspaper articles, pamphlets, and missionaries' letters, this article follows the "Children's Mission Ship," or *Morning Star*, from Boston to Ebon Atoll in the Pacific. It argues that missionaries viewed the Pacific not as a border or vast empty space, but rather as a "sea of islands" and as contiguous with "missionary settler archipelagos" throughout the Hawaiian Islands and North American continent. The article further argues that stories from the ship and the Micronesian mission helped forge a multi-generational capitalist and Protestant public that enacted and enabled subsequent American missionary and United States imperial expansion in the Pacific. This article is part of a special issue of *Pacific Historical Review*, "Religion in the Nineteenth-Century American West." **KEYWORDS** American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), Children's Mission Ship, *Morning Star*, missionaries, Pacific history, Micronesia, Marshall Islands

Our silver and gold in the ship Morning Star, / we've invested, expecting
returns from afar . . . / Away, like a bird, fly with wings light and free; /
Thy home, Morning Star, is away on the sea; / Glad tidings of joy 'tis thy
mission to bear; / They long for thy coming, in lands every where . . .

—“Morning Star Hymn”¹

At ten o'clock on the morning of December 1, 1856, the cheers of three thousand children filled the cold winter air as the *Morning Star* sailed out of Boston Harbor. Together the crowd prayed and sang the “Morning Star Hymn,” written to commemorate the occasion. The children were eager to see their ship—funded through contributions from two hundred thousand

1. Cited in Jane Warren, *The Morning Star: History of the Children's Missionary Vessel, and of the Marquesan and Micronesian Missions* (Boston: American Tract Society, 1860), 45–46.

young “stockholders”—depart for the Pacific.² There, a handful of Protestant missionaries hoped to expand a fledgling American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) mission, undertaken with support from the new Hawaiian Evangelical Association (HEA), to the region the children in Boston knew as Micronesia.³ The jubilant celebration and the Hymn’s lyrics reflected a Protestant public’s collective enthusiasm for the Board’s expansion into the Pacific beyond the Hawaiian Islands and hope for a warm reception from the people there.

From aboard the “Children’s Mission Ship” and a diverse series of islands and beaches, American missionaries recounted their experiences as outlanders and their interactions with islanders, translating them for a Protestant public back on the North American continent.⁴ In the 1850s and 1860s, stories about the *Morning Star* and updates from the Micronesian mission—published in religious pamphlets, books, and newspapers like the *Missionary Herald* as well as in secular outlets—communicated to American Protestants, and especially children, that they had a right and a responsibility to intervene in Micronesia as American Protestants and a missionizing role to play in the world. Even young children were expected to contribute—prayers, labor, and money—to the creation of a Protestant and capitalist American imperial future.⁵ Stories from the ship and from archipelagos like the Marshall Islands expanded their readers’ horizons, introducing them to new people and places

2. Warren, *The Morning Star*, 4.

3. On Protestant missionaries in Micronesia, Jay Dobbin with Francis X. Hezel, *Summoning the Powers Beyond: Traditional Religions in Micronesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011); John Garrett, *To Live among the Stars: Christian Origins in Oceania* (Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific, 1982); John Garrett, *Footsteps in the Sea: Christianity in Oceania to World War II* (Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific, 1992); John Garrett, *Where Nets Were Cast* (Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific, 1997); David Hanlon, *Upon a Stone Altar: A History of the Island of Pohnpei to 1890* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1988); Francis X. Hezel, *The First Taint of Civilization: A History of the Caroline and Marshall Islands in Pre-Colonial Days, 1521–1885* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1994).

4. Greg Denning uses “islands and beaches” as a metaphor to describe how people create and cross through worlds (islands) and boundaries (beaches) through symbols, rituals, relationships, and violence. Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches, Discourse on a Silent Land: Marquesas 1774–1880* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1980). David A. Chappell uses “the limen” or the ship’s deck to describe a frontier or threshold and place of encounter between islanders and Euroamerican traders. David A. Chappell, *Double Ghosts: Oceanian Voyagers on Euroamerican Ships* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1997).

5. On children and empire during the nineteenth century, see Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Brian Rouleau, *Empire’s Nursery: Children’s Literature and the Origins of the American Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2021); Joy Schultz, *Hawaiian by Birth: Missionary*

as seen through the eyes of American missionaries. In turn, their readers provided the American Board and the Micronesian mission with a steady stream of money and prayers and a ready audience for the missionaries' romantic and patronizing, upbeat and sobering updates.

These stories also afforded American readers a new and shifting vantage point from which to view the United States.⁶ Sighting the United States from the ocean, religion scholar Richard Callahan has written, reveals a nation that seems "to shrink into provincialism" at the same time as it illuminates new connections and aspects of history like the changing tide or a storm reveals and creates new islands, shorelines, and perspectives.⁷ During the mid-nineteenth century, the United States, as seen by missionaries from the ocean and from archipelagic mission stations like Ebon in the Marshall Islands, appeared politically and geographically volatile, its borders unsettled and its future uncertain.⁸ Prior to the completion of the transcontinental telegraph (1861) and railroad (1869), the United States was, as borderlands historian Samuel Truett has argued, "an archipelago of settler islands."⁹ American Protestant missionaries navigated and occupied these "settler archipelagos" on the North American continent and in the Pacific Ocean in an effort to convert them and the people who lived there physically—through the construction of churches and the introduction of clothing like Mother Hubbard dresses—and spiritually—through sermons and schooling. Some of these missionary settler archipelagoes were subsequently incorporated into the United States as states, while others claimed sovereignty, and

Children, Bicultural Identity, and U.S. Colonialism in the Pacific (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

6. Richard Callahan, "The Study of American Religion: Looming through the Glim," *Religion* 42 no. 3 (2012): 425–37.

7. *Ibid.*, 425.

8. Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens, eds., *Archipelagic American Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017). The pieces in this volume challenge the conception of the United States as a continental space, theorizing instead that the Americas comprise interconnected islands and seas.

9. Samuel Truett, "Settler Colonialism and the Borderlands of Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2019): 438. On the idea of "continental imperialism," see Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019). Paul Sabin asserts that regional definitions of the West "that demarcate a geographic area within U.S. national borders or within the trans-Mississippi regions of North America" are inadequate to frame twentieth-century western history (308–9). I would argue that this is also true for the nineteenth century. Paul Sabin, "Home and Abroad: The Two 'West's' of Twentieth-Century United States History," *Pacific Historical Review* 66, no. 3 (August 1997): 305–35.

others still have moved in and out of (and in some cases back into) the United States' imperial orbit.¹⁰

Like the “American West,” or “Micronesia,” or “the United States,” the term “religion,” Callahan contends, is “contested ground—not just in terms of conflict between or within religious institutions, communities, and people, but also conceptually, categorically, definitionally.”¹¹ What are the possibilities and challenges afforded from considering these “islands and beaches,” worlds and boundaries, from the Children’s Mission Ship? When a ship crests a wave, those aboard can see quite far, whereas from the trough, the field of view is delimited by a wall of water. Following the *Morning Star* and its missionaries allows us to examine what roles Protestant ideas and actors—outlanders and islanders—played in settling and unsettling these historical categories and places. From the crest we can see beyond singular, static, and ahistorical conceptions of the United States’ continental empire, the American West, Micronesia, and religion as fixed and bounded categories. From the trough, places like the Marshall Islands, the site of a nineteenth-century American Board mission and twentieth-century U.S. occupation and nuclear testing loom large. Following the *Morning Star* gives historians of American religion and of the American West an opportunity to reconsider the place of Micronesia—portions of which the United States has liberated, occupied, and/or “freely associated” with—within American religious and western historiography and to assess the lived implications of the positions the region and its people have occupied in real and imagined maps of the United States and U.S. empire.¹²

10. As historian Chris Friday has argued, “American colonialist and imperialist expansion did not stop at the water’s edge, but instead knit the western part of the continent into a broader global fabric of which a significant portion overlay the Pacific.” Chris Friday, “Where to Draw the Line? The Pacific, Place, and the US West,” in *A Companion to the American West*, ed. William Devereell (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 271. For another example, see Sean Fraga, “‘An Outlet to the Western Sea’: Puget Sound, Terraqueous Mobility, and Northern Pacific Railroad’s Pursuit of Trade with Asia, 1864–1892,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2020): 439–58.

11. Callahan, “The Study of American Religion,” 427; Paul Kramer reminds us that the ocean is also a historical construct. Paul Kramer, “A Complex of Seas: Passages between Pacific Histories,” *Amerasia* 42, no. 3 (2016): 33.

12. Laurie Maffly-Kipp, “Eastward Ho! American Religion from the Perspective of the Pacific Rim,” in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): 127–48; Rudy Busto, “Disorienting Subjects: Reclaiming Pacific Islander/Asian American Religions,” in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*, ed. Jane Iwamura and Paul Spickard (New York: New York University Press, 2003): 9–28. On maps and mental maps of the United States and U.S. empire, see Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019). For how Americans imagined

Using the *Morning Star*, American missionaries created a role for themselves in Micronesia and a rationale for their presence there. In this article, I follow the *Morning Star* from the American Board's 1856 fundraising campaign to Ebon Atoll in the Marshall Islands. I argue that the journey of the *Morning Star* shows that missionaries viewed the Pacific neither as an impenetrable border, nor as a vast empty space. Rather, they saw it as a part of a "sea of islands" and as contiguous with the "missionary settler archipelagos" in the Hawaiian Islands and on the North American continent.¹³ During the nineteenth century, American Protestant missionaries moved through and created worlds as Christians and Americans. They saw themselves as part of local, national, and supranational communities and served as mediators between members of these groups. Their experiences moving within and across political and cultural borders illuminate the supranational and transcendent possibilities of the "islands" they sought to create, while the consequences of their movements and settlements also demonstrate how Christian and capitalist missionary imperialism fed concurrent and subsequent U.S. imperialism.¹⁴

WESTWARD HO! THE ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN MISSION TO MICRONESIA

The American Board's initial foray into Micronesia came in 1852, four years before the *Morning Star* set sail from Boston Harbor, when the American Board and the Hawaiian Evangelical Association sent a handful of white American and Native Hawaiian missionaries to the Marquesas Islands, Kosrae, and Pohnpei. Against the backdrop of meager success converting people elsewhere, the Board saw the conversion of a majority of the Hawaiian population as well as key members of the Hawaiian monarchy as an exceptional example of Protestant possibility and as a template for what the Board

the Pacific, see Jeffrey Geiger, *Facing the Pacific: Polynesia and the U.S. Imperial Imagination* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

13. Epele Hau'ofa presents the Pacific not an empty space but rather as unbounded, an ocean full of islands and people who are connected by this shared experience of living on an island in the Pacific. In some respects, nineteenth-century missionaries held a similar outlook. Perhaps Hau'ofa was influenced by his missionary parents. Epele Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 148–61.

14. Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

hoped missionaries “might be expected to do in other lands.”¹⁵ After thirty years of missionary labor, the American Board boasted that the Hawaiian Islands were “one of the brightest trophies of the power of the cross.”¹⁶ When the Board looked out over the Pacific from the Hawaiian Islands, they anticipated a sea full of islanders awaiting the Protestant gospel.¹⁷

Since the Board established a mission in the Hawaiian Islands in 1820, American and Hawaiian missionaries had used the archipelago as a staging ground to evangelize people living throughout the Pacific Ocean, Asia, and—given the relative ease of traveling via ship rather than overland—the Pacific Northwest of the North American continent.¹⁸ From the Hawaiian Islands,

15. Consider the conversion of key royal figures, for example Queen Keōpūolani, mother of Kamehameha III (king of Hawai‘i from 1825 to 1854) in 1823, and the revival in 1837–1841. Samuel C. Bartlett, “Historical Sketch of the Hawaiian Mission, and Missions to Micronesia and the Marquesas Islands,” (Boston: ABCFM, 1871), 10, 11; Ronald Williams Jr., “Christianity in Hawaii,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, ed. John Corrigan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). For more on the failures of the Board in North America, the Middle East, and Asia, see Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism*; Laurie Maffly-Kipp, *Religion and Society in Frontier California* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); and Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

16. Bartlett, “Historical Sketch,” 10. There is an enormous amount of literature on the ABCFM mission to the Hawaiian Islands (and critiques thereof). See, for example, Patricia Grimshaw, *Paths of Duty: American Missionary Wives in Nineteenth-Century Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989); Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai‘i* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1993); Schultz, *Hawaiian by Birth*; Jennifer Thigpen, *Island Queens and Mission Wives: How Gender and Empire Remade Hawai‘i’s Pacific World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

17. Hau‘ofa, “Our Sea of Islands.” John Whitehead, “Hawaii: The First and Last Far West?” *Western Historical Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (1992), 175. Whitehead makes the case for the Hawaiian Islands as “a true Western frontier” and argues for their significance in the pre-Civil War maritime West. He demonstrates that a frontier space need not be peripheral. See also Paul Lyons, *American Pacificism: Oceania in the U.S. Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2005).

18. For a detailed treatment of Native Hawaiian Protestant missionary work in Micronesia and the Marquesas, see Kealani Cook, *Return to Kahiki: Native Hawaiians in Oceania* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018). For historical scholarship that centers Hawaiians, see David Chang, *The World and All the Things upon It: Native Hawaiian Geographies of Exploration* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); and Gary Okihiro, *American History Unbound: Asians and Pacific Islanders* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015). For a discussion of the challenges of an Oceania-centered history, see David Hanlon, “Losing Oceania to the Pacific and the World,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 29, no. 2 (2017): 286–318; and Teresia Teaiwa, “On Analogies: Rethinking the Pacific in Global Context,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 18, no. 1 (2006): 71–88. Additionally, David A. Chappell, *Double Ghosts: Oceanian Voyagers on Euroamerican Ships* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1997) focuses on Pacific Islanders who traveled aboard whaling and trading ships and disappeared from historical records and their communities; and Matthew Kestler, *Remembering Iosepa: History, Place and Religion in the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) describes Mormon Pacific Islander communities in Utah and Hawai‘i.

the *Missionary Herald* trumpeted, “heralds of salvation may go out to the tribes and nations in the north-western and western parts of America, in the north-eastern and eastern parts of Asia, and on the numerous islands of the Pacific.”¹⁹ In Micronesia, the American Board saw an opportunity to extend their Protestant influence west to a region that was in close proximity to Spain’s Catholic Pacific empire.

The American Board’s expansion into the Pacific during the 1850s occurred alongside a series of other American incursions into the Pacific: the “opening” of Japan in 1853, the (failed) attempt to annex the Hawaiian Islands in 1854 (opposed by American missionaries like Rufus Anderson who had worked for decades in support of Christianizing the Hawaiian monarchy), and the United States’ passage of the Guano Islands Act in 1856, which permitted U.S. citizens to claim “unclaimed” islands in the name of the United States and authorized the use of military force to protect the economic and strategic interests of the United States on these islands.²⁰ In the 1850s, the Board hastened to send missionaries to Micronesia in order to “introduce” the people there to the “purifying, elevating influences of the gospel, in advance of an infidel, corrupting civilization.”²¹

In many places throughout the Pacific, American Board missionaries worked alongside—and competed with or even converted—sailors, whalers, and traders from the United States, South America, Europe, and Asia.²² The Board framed these groups as competitors for the souls of the people who lived in Micronesia. Days before the *Morning Star* left Boston, Reverend Nehemiah Adams of the Essex Street Church warned that unless the missionaries “preoccupied” the islands in Micronesia, they would soon be occupied by “licentious, abandoned seamen.”²³ Adams portrayed the islands as vacant territories vulnerable—for better or for worse—to outside occupation and transformation. Hiram Bingham Jr., a white Hawaiian-born missionary

19. “Sandwich Islands Mission—Journal of the Missionaries,” *Missionary Herald*, July 1822, 213.

20. 48 U.S. Code § 1411 (enacted Aug. 18, 1856), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/48/1411>. Called the Guano Islands Act because it applied to deposits of guano (a valuable commodity and excellent albeit finite source of fertilizer) on “any island, rock, or key,” the United States laid claim to a series of islands in the Pacific (and a few in the Atlantic) including Baker Island, Midway Atoll, and Johnston Atoll under this statute. Many of these claims have been or continue to be disputed.

21. “Survey of the Missions of the Board,” *Missionary Herald*, January 1859, 10.

22. Briton C. Busch, “Whalemen, Missionaries, and the Practice of Christianity in the Nineteenth-Century Pacific,” *The Hawaiian Journal of History* 27 (1993): 91–118.

23. Rev. Nehemiah Adams, “The Morning Star and Micronesia, sermon, Park Street Church, Boston, Nov. 29, 1856,” *German Reformed Messenger*, January 8, 1857, 1.

who sailed on the *Morning Star*, presented the decision to establish mission stations throughout Micronesia as an urgent matter of religious and racial uplift. There were places in the region, he explained, where “no white man had ever been.” The Board needed to reach these islands as soon as possible “so that the first words from strange lips should be of ‘the great salvation,’” rather than the corrupting influences of traders, whalers, or the other “great many bad men” who roamed the Pacific.²⁴ As maritime historian Briton Busch has written, the men on whaleships provided “a useful scapegoat” when the missionaries did not achieve their desired outcomes in the Pacific.²⁵ Encounters with missionaries and merchants also afforded the people who lived on the islands a glimpse of different and often starkly contrasting views of American life beyond what they gleaned from their own voyages.²⁶

As the Board’s missionaries established stations on different islands in the region, the *Missionary Herald* gave an update on the growing American Protestant Pacific network and hinted at the Board’s expectations for expansion: “God has smiled upon the mission thus far. As the Sandwich Islands may be the first step, so Micronesia may be the second, in the great telegraphic post-route across the Pacific Ocean.”²⁷ The Board’s usage of the telegraph as a metaphor was interesting in light of the next sentence in the update: “The object of the churches should be to anticipate and counteract the invasions and corruptions of commerce” in the Pacific.²⁸ Although American missionaries predated the first trans-Pacific telegraph cables by almost half a century, in 1858, a year prior to this update, the first trans-Atlantic message was relayed via telegraph. The event prompted U.S. President James Buchanan to laud the technology in a letter to the queen of England as “an instrument destined by Divine Providence to diffuse religion, civilization, liberty, and law throughout the world.”²⁹ Instead of using technology like the telegraph to transmit Christianity and civilization, the Board planned to

24. Hiram Bingham Jr., *Story of the Morning Star*, 21.

25. Busch, “Whalemen,” 112.

26. *Ibid.*, 113.

27. “Survey of the Missions of the Board,” *Missionary Herald*, January 1859, 10.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Quoted in Jenna Supp-Montgomerie, *When the Medium Was the Mission: The Atlantic Telegraph and the Religious Origins of Network Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 96. Jenna Supp-Montgomerie argues that public figures in the United States framed the utility of the telegraph in religious terms and predicted it would unite the [Christian] world. “Letter from James Buchanan To Her Majesty, Victoria, Queen of Great Britain, Aug. 16, 1858,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, Aug. 28, 1858, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3b07162/>.

connect these islands to the United States and to the rest of the world via American missionaries and American Protestant capitalism.

First, however, the Board had to address two pressing challenges: how to reach Micronesia and how to finance the mission. The territory was enormous, larger than the entire (and recently expanded) continental United States. American missionaries needed a way to travel between islands hundreds—and in some cases thousands—of miles apart. The Board needed a ship to supply the missionaries and connect them with news from home. A ship would also signal that the missionaries were not acting alone; it announced that there were “thousands of good people, far away” who cared about the mission.³⁰ Among this Protestant public, a missionary ship would galvanize support for the Board, which was critical because the ship represented a significant expenditure. It would cost at least twelve thousand dollars to build and outfit a ship for the mission.³¹

“THE LORD LOVETH A CHEERFUL GIVER”: FUNDRAISING FOR THE MORNING STAR

In September 1856, the Board published an “Appeal to children and youth” in the *Missionary Herald*. It read:

The Sandwich Islands are now Christian. But westward of them, in the great Pacific, lie thousands of other islands, still filled with heathen . . . These heathen islands are called Micronesia. They are scattered over a space nearly as large as the whole of the United States. There should be no delay in sending the Gospel to Micronesia. But how shall missionaries go to them? Few ships visit these barbarous islands. If the American Board would send them the gospel, it must own a vessel for this purpose.³²

The Board’s campaign emphasized the important role that children could play in the expansion of the American Protestant missionary enterprise and incorporated them into a multi-generational, supranational network of Protestants. It was a coup. By the end of 1856, the Board raised roughly three times more than what they set out to collect.³³ Money came from children in every state in the union, the Oregon territory, American missionary

30. Bingham, *Story of the Morning Star*, 21.

31. Warren, *The Morning Star*, 26.

32. *Missionary Herald*, September 1856, 284. The quote in the section header is from 2 Cor. 9:7.

33. Warren, *The Morning Star*, 34.

communities in the Middle East and Asia, the Hawaiian Islands, and Europe. In one instance, an American in Syria explained: “We do not doubt that you can do the work yourselves; but there are some children away off here in Asia, who would like to help you. They attend our school and meeting, and study the New Testament; and have they not a right to join with American children in this good work?”³⁴

Although transnational in nature, the project served to amplify American Protestant missionary power. By appealing to children for contributions, the American Board both tapped into and in essence created its own renewable resource. Indeed, the Board framed the *Morning Star* campaign as an investment opportunity that would pay dividends for the children as well as for the Micronesians whom they hoped would be grateful recipients of their goodwill and gospel. Each contributor received a personalized “certificate of ownership” from the American Board, which were modeled on certificates issued to stockholders of various ventures—from railways to roadways—during the 1850s. In this case, the certificates featured a drawing of the ship floating atop a quote from Mark 3:9, “He spake to his disciples that a small ship should wait on him.” The certificates could be personalized with the name of the child and the amount of money they contributed and were each signed by the ABCFM Treasurer, James Gordon. By presenting people with a keepsake to discuss and display, the Board hoped the certificates would inspire further support.

The campaign and the children were commemorated in multiple ways. Pamphlets and books printed by the American Tract Society and the American Board recounted with riveting detail the story of the “Children’s Mission Ship.” These books were part of a growing body of literature that included poems and songs that celebrated the campaign and the mission to Micronesia. Texts like Jane Warren’s 1860 *The Morning Star: History of the Children’s Missionary Vessel, and of the Marquesan and Micronesian Missions* and Bingham’s 1866 *Story of the Morning Star* sought to inspire a passion for mission work and capitalism in their young readers. They sought to elicit pity for the people in the Pacific and engendered a sense of racialized religious superiority among their audience of American Christians. Primarily, though, they sought to spur additional contributions.

The ten-cent cost of a share in the *Morning Star* (worth roughly three 2022 dollars), was pricey but not prohibitively so. Almost anyone could find

34. Ibid, 32.



FIGURE 1. Sunday schooler James Pennycook received this certificate noting his contribution of 50 cents to the 1856 fundraising campaign for the *Morning Star*. Source: Personal collection of the author.

a way to contribute. Together, the children's contributions represented an enormous collective and unifying effort at a time when the United States was on the precipice of being torn asunder (and some Protestant denominations like the Baptists and Methodists had already splintered) by competing views on the morality and the economic and political viability of enslaving human beings. Notably, moreover, the stories told about the campaign highlighted the vastly different racial and class identities of the children and communities who participated in the campaign. These ranged from a Sunday School in Boston whose attendees purchased a \$190 chronometer for the ship to a group of Tuscarora Indians whom Warren described as having "scraped" together the money for a single share.³⁵ Anecdotes like this one also served as a testimonial to the Board's success elsewhere. By featuring the Tuscarora, a community that was home to an earlier mission, the Board demonstrated how their work built on itself.

Stories about the Children's Mission Ship offered numerous anecdotes about the young "shareholders" who contributed to the campaign. These stories served a didactic purpose, seeking to impress upon young readers the importance of cultivating virtues like industriousness, piety, selflessness, generosity, and shrewdness. One featured a child who hemmed handkerchiefs to raise the money to purchase a share. The experience was transformative. As she explained, whereas she hated sewing before, "I love to now, because I am doing it for the missionaries who go away so far to teach the Bible to the poor heathen."³⁶ The campaign served as a way to help create Christian capitalists at home and abroad. Together, these stories also presented the American children who contributed to the campaign as economically and spiritually affluent compared to the people they deemed "poor heathens" in the Pacific. Their narratives reflect the insights of anthropologist and historian of North American Christianity, Hillary Kaell, who has argued in her work on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Christian sponsorship that Protestant Americans continually centered themselves "as the axis through which God's resources flow."³⁷ The stories taught American children that they could play a missionizing role in Micronesia just as earlier generations of missionaries had in places like the Hawaiian Islands.

35. Ibid, 36.

36. Ibid, 30.

37. Hillary Kaell, *Christian Globalism at Home: Child Sponsorship in the United States* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2020), 4.

CHRISTENING THE MORNING STAR

Four months after the Board's appeal, the ship was ready to sail. For children who had the opportunity to attend the festivities in Boston, the ninety-by-forty-foot brigantine was a sight to behold. Journalists deemed the Massachusetts-built packet a "noble specimen in American naval architecture."³⁸ The ship was adorned with a gilded bas-relief of "an open Bible, resting on a cushion with tassels on the corners" and "supported by olive branches." The namesake star appeared to "radiate" from the Bible's pages. For those who were unable to see the ship before it departed, one article offered readers a striking visual and theological interpretation of the vessel's ornamentation: "On the bow is a carved figure of a female, carrying the word of God in her hand as an offering to the benighted heathen." Symbolically laden descriptions like these reinforced the idea that the *Morning Star's* errand was to bring the light of the Gospel to a people who lived in metaphorical darkness. Many nineteenth-century American Protestants subscribed to the belief that Micronesians (and other non-Christians) were trapped in a state of ignorance or darkness that could only be overcome by conversion to Christianity as introduced by American Board missionaries.

The ship's name spoke to this religious and racializing imperative. In Boston, the Reverend S. L. Pomeroy, an ABCFM secretary, explained its significance:

When that bright star comes up, it announces to all beholders that the great sun will soon lift his head above the horizon. So when this beautiful packet shall approach and land the missionary and the Word of God on one of the dark islands of that far-off ocean, it will be a sure sign that a new day is about to dawn, and the Sun of righteousness soon to rise upon them.³⁹

Pomeroy evoked the double-meaning of "sun" as signifying both the light of the Gospel and the "son" of God and presented a teleology in which the American Protestant settlement of these archipelagos and the conversion of the islanders was inevitable. Although many Micronesians were incredibly adept navigators and voyagers, Pomeroy depicted them as stagnant and

38. "The Missionary Brig 'Morning Star,'" *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion*, December 20, 1856, 25.

39. Reverend S. L. Pomeroy, "Launching of the 'Morning Star': For Children, Missionary House Boston, Nov. 12, 1856," *The Independent*, December 4, 1856, 7. Multiple Bible verses can serve as references for "*Morning Star*," including 2 Peter 1:19; Job 2:28; Job 38:7; and Rev. 22:16.

isolated. Ironically, he delivered this message on what was surely one of the shortest, coldest, and darkest days of December in Boston, while the islands in that “far-off ocean” were almost certainly bathed in tropical sunshine and considerably more hours of daylight.

Statements like Pomeroy’s reflected how, during the mid-nineteenth century, some white Protestants used the dualistic language of light and darkness to ascribe religious and racial difference and assert a relationship between ontological and social status.⁴⁰ The significant role played by Native Hawaiian Christian missionaries and converts in Micronesia demonstrated, however, that the relationship between ontological and racial status was not fixed, but rather contingent, mutable, and on a spectrum.⁴¹ To be sure, white American Protestants largely defined the parameters of this spectrum and attempted to position individuals and groups (including themselves) along it. At the same time, other communities, including those in the Pacific, developed and asserted their own understandings of the relationships between race, religion, and identity.⁴² In an 1860 *Missionary Herald* update from Micronesia, Bingham claimed that the people there were a recently “discovered” “race” who desperately needed “a knowledge of Christ and heaven.” According to Bingham, they were the last people on the earth who still lived “in utter ignorance of a Savior’s love” because of the Pacific Ocean.⁴³ He proclaimed: “The tract, the Bible, the catechist, the preacher, have traversed and will continue to traverse the plains and mountains of Asia and Africa. No ocean prevents.” In Micronesia, however, “dreary wastes of waters roll about us. They cannot be passed. They will forever debar this people from a knowledge of Christ and heaven, unless Christians shall remember them.”⁴⁴ Only the *Morning Star* could “link” the people in Micronesia with “God’s people” in America.

40. Emily Conroy-Krutz, “The Hierarchy of Heathenism: Missionaries Map the World,” *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 1 (2018): 55–71.

41. Cook, *Return to Kabiki*. Kealani Cook has pointed out that for Native Hawaiians, accepting this hierarchy that placed them above other Pacific Islanders was a double-edged sword because it also required them to assert their own inferiority to white Christians.

42. For more on how race and religion were co-constituted in the Pacific, see Hokulani K. Aikau, *A Chosen People, A Promised Land: Mormonism and Race in Hawai‘i* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012). On racialization and settler colonialism in the Pacific, see Maile Arvin, *Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai‘i and Oceania* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

43. Bingham, “A Plea for the People,” *Missionary Herald*, May 1860, 132.

44. *Ibid.*

THE MORNING STAR IN THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

One year after leaving Boston, after stopovers in the Hawaiian Islands and Kosrae, the *Morning Star* was met by a fleet of seventeen Marshallese canoes near Ebon Atoll. Some of the Marshallese men aboard the canoes recognized Dr. George Pierson, one of the American Board missionaries on the *Morning Star* who had been stationed on Kosrae, and greeted the ship with shouts of “Missionary!” and “Doctor!”

The American missionaries believed they would be welcomed by the Marshallese. On Kosrae, a group of Marshallese men from Ebon taught Pierson to speak Marshallese and encouraged him to visit their atoll.⁴⁵ Pierson and his wife, Nancy, had also previously visited Ailinglaplap, another Marshallese atoll, where they met Kaibuke, the *irooj*, or leader of many of the atolls on the Ralik or western “sunset” side of the Marshall Islands. Per Pierson’s accounts, Kaibuke was supportive of their plans to establish a station in the Marshall Islands. Pierson described their reception for the readers of the *Missionary Herald*:

Soon a number of the natives were on board, all anxious to know if we intended to remain with them now, saying they had been waiting a long time for us to come. They told me, that on account of our long delay some had said they did not believe we would ever come. But others, who had become acquainted with us at [Kosrae], said we would come, “for missionaries always do as they say they will.” During our interview with them I was several times taken by the arm and drawn to the side of the vessel, that I might be seen by those in the proas; so anxious were they that all might see me with their own eyes, and be assured that we had actually come. We were told that there was but one feeling among the people, from the highest to the lowest, and that was one of desire that we should take up our abode with them.⁴⁶

According to Pierson’s account, many of the Marshallese had faith that the missionaries would one day come to their island. Seemingly, the aspirations of the children in Boston and of the mission as expressed in the “Morning Star Hymn” were being fulfilled: the missionaries and the Gospel had arrived in the Marshall Islands, where they found a community that welcomed them.⁴⁷

45. Previously, George Pierson was a missionary to the Choctaw people. *Annual Report*, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (Boston, 1853), 153.

46. “Letter from Dr. Pierson, Dec. 1857,” *Missionary Herald*, June 1858, 183.

47. The arrival of the *Morning Star* is celebrated each December in the Marshall Islands as Gospel Day, a national holiday.

From the outset, the missionaries and the Board portrayed the Marshall Islands and the Marshallese people as exceptional. When the missionaries went ashore, Pierson reported that they were met by “a large company of natives” who expressed “the kindest feelings” and set to work building a place for the missionaries to live.⁴⁸ When Kaibuke arrived, he welcomed the missionaries and gave them permission to stay there.⁴⁹ Pierson related that Kaibuke “seemed delighted to see us and expressed great pleasure at the thought that we intended to take up our residence on the island.”⁵⁰ It was surely a relief to Pierson, who had “strongly recommended” Ebon for a mission station, to find a community that was accommodating.⁵¹ After having struggled to gain a foothold elsewhere in Micronesia, Pierson interpreted Kaibuke’s and the community’s reception as evidence of God’s blessing. He assured the *Herald’s* readers, “In these expressions of regard for us we could not fail to see the answer to our prayers, that the Lord would prepare the way for our entrance among this people, and dispose them to look upon us with favor.”⁵²

When the *Morning Star* left the Piersons and another missionary couple, Edward and Sarah Doane, on Ebon, the Americans found themselves on a small tropical island in a large tempestuous ocean among a people whose language and customs they were only beginning to learn. They had no supplies beyond what the *Morning Star* carried (and what the Marshallese people shared with them) and no ready way to communicate with their loved ones in the United States or even the other missionaries in Micronesia. What they did have was their faith in God and a conviction that their mission was worthy. They had the prayers, hopes, and financial backing of the *Morning*

48. “Letter from Dr. Pierson, Dec. 1857,” *Missionary Herald*, June 1858, 183.

49. *Ibid.*, 184.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Rufus, *History of Sandwich Islands Mission* (Boston: Congregational Publishing Society, 1870), 314.

52. “Letter from Dr. Pierson, Dec. 1857,” *Missionary Herald*, June 1858, 184. The welcome that Pierson described is notable given that land in the Marshall Islands is scarce and sacred. The members of the community on Ebon built churches, schools, and homes for the missionaries. Kaibuke also likely recognized that he could benefit from the missionaries’ presence on his land. Having the American missionaries, particularly Pierson, a trained doctor, enhanced Kaibuke’s power and benefitted his community. As Pacific historian Monica LaBriola has argued, by presenting the missionaries with a place to live, Kaibuke did not give away Marshallese land (which Marshallese see as inalienable) but rather ensured the missionaries stayed on Ebon instead of leaving to establish their mission elsewhere, such as on a rival-controlled atoll. See Monica LaBriola, “Planting Islands: Marshall Islanders Shaping Land, Power, and History,” *The Journal of Pacific History* 54, no. 2 (2019): 182–98.

Star's young shareholders. And, at the time, they had the support of the *irooj*, which gave them power and legitimacy.⁵³

From Micronesia, American missionaries wrote letters to children from the perspective of the ship. Regularly featured in the *Herald* alongside other correspondence from the region, these letters assured readers, and especially children, of their prudent investment. In these letters—signed “your dear mission ship”—missionaries communicated the evangelical inroads they believed themselves to be making, while also portraying their work as incomplete to justify their continued presence on Ebon and their repeated requests for financial support. Excerpts from the letters were woven into Warren’s and Bingham’s narratives and afforded American children a glimpse of life aboard the *Morning Star* and a window into the missionaries’ labors on the islands. One dispatch promised, “your dimes are doing good; they have not been spent in vain.”⁵⁴ Combining Christian and capitalist terminology, the missionaries’ messages described charitable giving as a sound investment and taught the children how to be benevolent and industrious Protestant capitalists. Doane assured the school-aged shareholders, “The practical value of this missionary packet to the cause of the Redeemer has been all that was expected. And now she is yielding a good percentage.” The ship was invaluable; it enabled the Board to convert the region into an American missionary archipelago.

The missionaries’ characterizations of the mission and the Marshallese varied. Bingham, Pierson, and Doane expressed differing attitudes and perspectives depending on where they were, how they felt their work was progressing, and what they saw as their purpose. These divergences were especially pronounced in the Board’s fundraising appeals. In an 1860 “Plea for the People” published in the *Missionary Herald*, Bingham portrayed Micronesians as stagnant and passive.⁵⁵ Well after he had spent sufficient time in the Pacific to know otherwise, he claimed, “It is utterly impossible for them to cross the wide ocean in their frail barks, in search of the Savior.” And, he lamented, “Unless the Gospel is *brought to them*, they must perish.” Bingham used the *Morning Star* as a metaphor for American Protestant exceptionalism. Only they had

53. Kaibuke reportedly took to referring to Pierson as “his son” and told the people of Ebon that “any injury done” to the missionaries “will be regarded as done to himself.” Ebon, Letter from Dr. Pierson, Dec. 1857,” *Missionary Herald*, June 1858, 185; Matthew 25:40. For a discussion of how missionaries deployed familial language, see Nicholas Thomas, “Colonial Conversions: Difference, Hierarchy, and History in Early Twentieth-Century Evangelical Propaganda,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 2 (1992): 366–89.

54. “Mr. Doane’s Letter” cited in Warren, *The Morning Star*, 26.

55. Hiram Bingham Jr., “Plea for the People,” *Missionary Herald*, May 1860, 132.

a ship that could traverse the vast ocean, only they had a gospel that could cut through the proverbial darkness. Bingham implored readers to continue funding the mission even “when staggered by” its cost.

Elsewhere, however, the missionaries acknowledged that the Marshallese were extraordinary navigators. Two pages after Bingham’s Plea—in the same issue—Doane described the Marshallese as “fond of making excursions.”⁵⁶ In fact, their “migratory character” occasionally *impeded* the Americans’ missionary efforts.⁵⁷ Kaibuke frequently travelled and only spent part of the year on Ebon. These trips were not minor affairs. Marshallese canoes could hold more people than the *Morning Star*; on some voyages Kaibuke was accompanied by forty canoes carrying “at least eight hundred souls.”⁵⁸

Pierson and Doane recognized that the “migratory habits” of the people could also aid the spread of Christianity. Their goal was not just to evangelize the people on Ebon, but rather to use the atoll as a jumping off point to reach people who lived throughout the Ralik and Ratak chains in the Marshall Islands and from there move even further afield. Given the enormous size of the archipelago, American missionaries needed Marshallese people to serve as missionaries if they wanted to reach, and hopefully save, everyone. “In their migrations they carry a report of us and our work to the other islands, which we, situated as we are here, cannot reach,” Doane explained in an update. He hoped that conversion to Christianity would be a corollary of Marshallese people’s interisland travel and rightly anticipated that Marshallese Christians would be integral to the spread of Christianity in the region.⁵⁹ When a group of Marshallese from Mili Atoll—outside of Kaibuke’s territory—landed on Ebon, Doane expressed hope that they might one day be able to carry the word of God back home with them, much like the group from Ebon had carried word of the missionaries home from Kosrae. He wondered whether this would be how “God will call attention to that eastern chain of the Marshall Islands?” and prayed for a future when “these exiled ones may be

56. Edward Doane, “Report of the Ebon Station,” *Missionary Herald*, May 1860, 133. Bingham later acknowledged the Marshallese were “bold navigators,” either contradicting his earlier characterizations or to contrast the Marshallese with other Micronesian communities. Bingham, *Story of the Morning Star*, 44.

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*

59. Garrett, *To Live among the Stars*, 147. A few years after the Piersons (1860) and Doanes (Doane returned to Micronesia in 1865 with a new wife, Clara) left the Ebon mission, seven Native Hawaiian couples arrived and, with an increasing number of Marshallese Christians, played a significant role in the spread of Christianity in the Marshall Islands.

permitted to return, to tell their own people the wonderful story they have heard, of Jesus and the cross.”⁶⁰

While the missionaries were surely mindful of the audience for their updates and cognizant of the need for what were essentially dividends to support the mission, their portrayals of their work and of Marshallese people were also undoubtedly influenced by their theology, by their experiences, and by the relationships they developed with Marshallese people. This was one way that Marshallese people and culture reciprocally influenced the missionaries’ understandings of their situation and helped to delimit the missionaries’ evangelical possibilities.⁶¹

1898

Together, the 1856 *Morning Star* campaign and the 1857 Micronesian mission helped build a multigenerational and supranational network of American, Native Hawaiian, and later Micronesian Protestants and Protestant missionaries. Contributing to the campaign and consuming news from Micronesia helped create a Protestant public that was invested in the region. This model proved to be a boon for the Board. The *Morning Star* fundraising campaign was replicated three times over the subsequent three decades, again at the turn of the twentieth century as the United States formalized its occupation of the Hawaiian Islands, the Philippines, Guam, and American Samoa, and twice more during the late 1940s and 1950s, a few years after the U.S. government began its formal occupation of Micronesia. Between 1856 and 1884, the Board raised approximately \$115,000 (equivalent to over \$2.7 million in 2020 dollars) and purchased four *Morning Stars*. In the Marshall Islands, the missionaries’ arrival preceded the arrival of the U.S. military by almost a century. Elsewhere in the Pacific, however, formal representatives of the state arrived on the heels of the American Board missionaries.

As the turn of the twentieth century and the fiftieth anniversary of the *Morning Star*’s launch approached, the Board published “A Call for Missionary Advance,” a pamphlet written by Francis Price, an American missionary on Chuuk. Celebrating the “sixty distinctively religious communities” the Board had established in Micronesia and reflecting on the United States’ acquisition and occupation of the Philippines and Guam, Price urged the

60. “Journal of Mr. Doane, Jan. 4 to March 10, 1858,” *Missionary Herald*, February 1859, 34.

61. Tony Ballantyne, *Entanglements of Empire: Missionaries, Maori, and the Question of the Body* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014): 15.

Board to expand its missionary work in the Pacific.⁶² Echoing the “Morning Star Hymn,” Price claimed the islands further west were “calling for us to ‘come over and help’ them.”⁶³ (Americans, especially Protestant New Englanders, might have understood this language as a reference to the original seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which included these words along with an image of an Indigenous man wearing a loincloth and as an allusion to Acts 16:9.) Price’s writing demonstrated the entangled religious, political, commercial, and military interests at play in the United States’ conversion of a Spanish Catholic Pacific empire into an American and, he believed, Protestant one. Price explained, “The lifting of the American flag among these islands is God’s summons to the American churches to evangelize their peoples.”⁶⁴

Over time, regularly published accounts of the *Morning Star* and Micronesian mission (in 1860, 1866, 1883, 1885, 1886, 1897, 1903, 1907, and 1943) created an appetite for and fed the American Protestant public’s interest in a Protestant American presence in the Pacific. As the U.S. increased its formal presence in the region, this had religious and political consequences. Namely, the longstanding presence of American missionaries communicated to the public that the region was one where they had and should continue to have a presence and where representatives of other faiths and other empires should not. This sense of familiarity with and entitlement to Micronesia helped pave the way for U.S. military, economic, and colonial expansion into the region in 1898. According to Price, the world was waiting to see what the Americans would do in the United States’ newly occupied Pacific territories.

Expectant eyes now look to Guam to see what America is like, and Guam must be made a center of the best that our civilization can give. This means that we give them the gospel, with its churches, and schools, and other Christian institutions. Surely the dictates of patriotism, as well as obedience to our glorified Lord Jesus, urge us to “take up the white man’s burden,” and send forth chosen men and beloved who are willing to “hazard their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus.”⁶⁵

62. Francis Price, “Mission Work and Opportunities in the Pacific Islands,” *The Independent* (Nov. 9, 1899), 51; Francis Price, *A Call for Missionary Advance in the Pacific Islands* (Boston: ABCFM, 1899): 2.

63. Price, *A Call for Missionary Advance*, 2.

64. *Ibid.*, 3.

65. *Ibid.*, 3–4.

Although the Board's interests were not synonymous with those of the U.S. government, they were seen by missionaries like Price as shared. Protestantism and patriotism—belief in God and in the United States—sanctified this mission in the eyes of missionary imperialists like Price. He called for American missionaries to work in tandem with the U.S. military and—in the words of poet Rudyard Kipling—“take up the white man's burden.” After 1898, American missionaries who served God in the Pacific would also be serving U.S. state interests. Rather than cast the evangelical errand as the primary aim of missionary work like his predecessors had, Price saw American missionaries as patriots first and Christians second. Following the U.S. annexation of Guam, he advocated for American missionaries to follow the flag to ensure the new U.S. subjects were good Protestant Christians.

The increased U.S. military and political presence in the Pacific in the wake of the Spanish-American War changed the nature of missionary work in the region. Price believed the Board could transform Guam into a new missionary settler archipelago by building “churches, schools, and other Christian institutions” and advocated turning Guam, already a military base following the War of 1898, into a missionary “base.”⁶⁶ Occupied by the United States and by American Protestant missionaries, Guam could “be as a city on a hill among the islands of Micronesia.”⁶⁷ Micronesia would not be a remote outpost of American Christianity and U.S. empire, but rather a center of it.⁶⁸ Furthermore, Price believed Protestant patriots should commit to purchasing a share in this newest venture.⁶⁹ “We are assured,” he advised, “that no work can be more Christlike, no work yield more rapid returns, or larger for the outlay, and that no work offers a safer investment.”⁷⁰

The following year, Indiana Senator Albert Beveridge declared in a speech before Congress, “the Pacific is our Ocean . . . The power that rules the Pacific, therefore, is the power that rules the world.”⁷¹ An ardent imperialist, Beveridge asserted that the United States, acting as God's “chosen nation,” should establish its “supremacy . . . over the Pacific and throughout the East

66. *Ibid.*, 3, 5.

67. Price echoed John Winthrop, the British colonist and Puritan governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and his aspirations for the Protestant settler colony in 1630.

68. Price did not mention democratizing the islands or imply that Micronesians—like the Chamoru people on Guam—should have access to rights or representation.

69. Price, *A Call for Missionary Advance*, 7.

70. *Ibid.*

71. 56 Cong. Rec. S704-712 (Jan. 9, 1900) (statement of Sen. Baker).

til the end of time.”⁷² Like Price and the missionaries who traveled to Micronesia in 1857 seeking to “save” the people there, Beveridge believed that Americans had a “divine mission” to redeem the world.

During the nineteenth century, the stories that Americans told from and about the missionary settler archipelagoes they created in the Pacific and the communities who lived there forged a multi-generational Protestant public that enacted and enabled subsequent American missionary and United States imperial expansion in the Pacific. Over the course of the twentieth century, American missionaries and the U.S. military have maintained a presence in Micronesia using these stories as a mooring.⁷³

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72. Ibid.

73. Carleigh Beriont, “For the Good of Mankind’: Atomic Exceptionalism, Religion, and United States Empire in the Postwar Pacific,” *A Companion to American Religious History*, ed. Benjamin Park (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2021): 287–98.