

THE HAYSTACK PRAYER MEETING MYTH

In my dissertation, *Reflex Influence*, I have this footnote in Chapter 3, Part 1 (footnote 9)

Most accounts of the origin of American missions refer to a "Haystack Prayer Meeting." The tradition is: "At a stated prayer meeting, held at hours when most students are either engaged in sport or are doing nothing, the idea was presented. Driven by an approaching thunderstorm from the grove where the meeting had usually been held, they took shelter behind a neighboring haystack, and there, in the language of one who was present, 'Mills proposed to send the gospel to that dark and heathen land, and said we could do it if we would.' The subject was then discussed, and as the storm was passing away, Mills said, 'Come, let us make it a subject of prayer under this haystack, while the dark clouds are going and the clear sky is coming.' So they prayed, and continued to pray and consult together through that and the following season."

--Mark Hopkins, "Historical Discourse," in Memorial Volume, Anderson, 17.

However, accounts differ on who was in the haystack, when, and what for. The best sources indicate the meeting occurred in the Fall of 1808 (7 Sept.), as the Brethren discussed the constitution of their society

--Edward D. Griffin, A Sermon Preached September 2, 1828, at the Dedication of the New Chapel Connected with Williams College, Massachusetts (Williamstown: Ridley Bannister, 1828), 24 n.; Calvin Montague Clark, "The Brethren: A Chapter in the History of American Missions," 4. Society of Brethren Papers, Andover-Newton Theological School, Newton Centre, Mass
Richard Donald Pierce, "A History of the Society of Inquiry at Andover Theological Seminary, 1811-1920" (B.D. thesis, Andover Theological School, 1938), 14.

Others locate the Haystack meeting in the Fall of 1807, when Mills shared his missionary dreams with Hall, Richards, and Fisk--

Samuel M. Worcester, The Life and Labors of Rev. Samuel Worcester, D.D. (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1852), 2:86;
Joseph Tracy, History of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1842), 23;
implied in Gardiner Spring, Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel J. Mills (New York: J. Seymour, 1820), 29.

However, 1806 is the date on the monument at Williams College, and has been commonly accepted--

John N. Hewitt, Williams College and Foreign Missions (Boston, New York, Chicago: Pilgrim, 1914), 40.

The 200th anniversary of the Haystack Prayer Meeting was celebrated in 2006. When I challenged the date, I encountered adamant resistance.

The location of the Haystack Prayer Meeting, where a monument now stands, was pointed out by Byram Green, who claimed to be present at the meeting, and dated the meeting in July or August of 2006. There are problems with this claim:

1. The letter in which he made these claims is missing from the Williams College archives, where it had been deposited.
2. The name of Byram Green does not appear in any primary or secondary material relating to the origin of the Society of Inquiry or the A. B. C. F. M.
3. Other sources, as indicated in the footnote above, while not providing a date, certainly imply a later date.
4. It is difficult to believe that these young men, driven by a sense of urgency, would wait two years before taking action by organizing the Society of Inquiry.

Considering the similarity between the commitment made in the Haystack and the commitment of the Society of Inquiry, the more probable date would be shortly before the organization of the Society on 8 September 1808.