

# The Stockbridge Bible and the Church History of the Stockbridge Mohicans

By Jeff Seimers



*Editorial Note: "From Generation the Generation: The Story of the Stockbridge Bible" appeared in the Spring, 2007 issue of The Book Collector. It focused on issues of who owned the Bible and where it was kept over its long history. The present article, by the same author, has a church history focus and attempts to get a grip on what the Stockbridge Bible meant to the Stockbridge Mohicans over that same period of time.*

---

A magnificent, pulpit-sized, two-volume Bible was given to the Indian mission congregation at Stockbridge, Massachusetts<sup>1</sup> in 1745. On the other side of the Atlantic, retired sea captain Thomas Coram was raising funds for a boarding school for the

Indian girls. Captain Coram sought a financial donation from Prince Frederick of Wales and, in the process, the Prince's personal chaplain, Rev. Francis Ayscough, was moved to give the tribe the special Bible. What did the Stockbridge Bible mean to its owners over the years? To some extent, this question must be answered indirectly, using the context of the tribal mission church. However, observations of the Stockbridge Mohicans vis-à-vis their Bible as well as actual statements about it made by tribal leaders have also been used.

A line of thinking known as millennialism was popular among Christians in Britain and the American colonies. It was based on passages in the books of Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation and elsewhere. Millennial thinking had its variations, but essentially it was about Christ's Second Coming, including a one-thousand-year earthly reign.<sup>2</sup> According to church historian J.A. deJong, expectations of the millennium were "among the most powerful arguments" that got mission-supporting legislation passed in the British Parliament.

Concern for the ten lost tribes of Israel also played a major role in millennial thinking. Many believed that the millennium could not start until the ten lost tribes returned to the Holy Land or at least until they converted to Christianity. Many of those same people believed that the American Indians were descendants of the lost tribes of Israel. As a result, Christian missions to the Indians were seen as having a central importance in the salvation history of all humankind.



Thomas Coram

The mission at Stockbridge, Massachusetts – although many secular and religious factors were certainly in play – existed within the mindset of millennial expectations. The Stockbridge Mohicans' first missionary, John Sergeant, had studied under their second missionary, Jonathan Edwards, at Yale. Although Edwards didn't believe that American Indians were descended from the lost tribes of Israel, the conversion of Native nations, in his way of thinking, would amount to significant momentum toward a world that was ready for Christ's Second Coming.

Dispossessed of most of their land in Massachusetts by the 1780's, the Stockbridge Mohicans headed west to establish the town of New Stockbridge, New York. We know they cherished their tribal Bible at this point because they built an oak chest to protect the two large volumes. Furthermore, they carried the heavy Stockbridge Bible with them in that oak chest at a time when they were so poor that it is unlikely that they owned horses. By carrying this Bible in two large volumes, protected by an oak chest, the

Stockbridge Mohicans—in this and later migrations—bore a striking similarity to the ancient Israelites who carried the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets protected

by their Ark of the Covenant. This similarity could not have been lost on the Christian Indians or their white neighbors.

The tribal church at New Stockbridge, New York was visited by two ministers who were planning a mission to the Holy Land (which was under Muslim control at that time). Part of the ceremony of this 1819 event was a speech from Chief Hendrick Aupaumut, whose words suggest that he believed that Indians were descendants of the lost tribes of Israel:

Many of the heathen Indians of this Island when they heard [that Jesus was killed by the Jews] were much enraged, and declared they would not have killed so good a brother.

Waves of white settlers pushed their way into New York State and the Stockbridge Mohicans, after attempting to establish a new homeland in Indiana Territory, made it to present-day Wisconsin. Within about two years of the arrival of the first Stockbridge Indians at their new settlement of Statesburg, the tribal leaders wrote to the Boston-based philanthropic mission society that continued to support their remaining people at New Stockbridge, New York. The Indians stated that they were managing to keep the Sabbath like good Calvinist Christians and they asked that the missionary that was working part-time among the remnant of their tribe remaining in New Stockbridge would be transferred to their new settlement. The tribal leaders' request was eventually granted.

In 1830, Calvin Colton, a Presbyterian minister from the east, made a tour of the Great Lakes. In his observations of the Stockbridge Mohicans and their tribal Bible, he quotes from the inscription that Captain Coram wrote when Rev. Francis Ayscough gave the two volumes to the tribe.



Francis Ayscough with the Prince of Wales (later King George III) and Edward Augustus, Duke of York and Albany by Richard Wilson, c. 1700s

I saw a Bible yesterday, safely kept in a sort of ark, at their place of worship, (a remarkable relic of Hebrew custom), printed at Oxford... And here it is, as bright and as perfect as when first it came from the hands of the pious donor; — and that not to prove, that it has not been used — for it has been used constantly in public worship.

But it has been carefully used, and carefully kept in the ark of the covenant! It came from Old England to the “Housatonic [River], in the vast wilderness of New England” It was transported to the State of New York; — and, for aught I know, with all the sacerdotal solemnities of their Hebrew fathers, in ancient days. And it was again transported by the same religious care to this vast wilderness, of the North-west. And here it is: a perpetual monument of their fear of God, and of their love of his word and

ordinances. Their reverence for this volume and for the ark, which contains it, is almost superstitious. [Italics in the original.]

Unfortunately, the Stockbridge Mohicans were not done with their migrations. The reasons for their next two moves cannot be quickly summarized, but certainly sloppy work by the United States government and the pressure of more white settlers were huge factors. In the mid-1830's, the tribe moved from Statesburg to another settlement which became Stockbridge, Wis-consin. The tribe's missionary, Rev. Cutting Marsh, moved with the people. Marsh's salary came from the Society in Scotland for Promoting Christian Knowledge, an organization that was "closely associated with millennial expectations." At the same time, the Stock-bridge mission as a whole was under the auspices of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) until Rev. Marsh left in 1848. The ABCFM had been founded "as a structure for realizing the millennial hopes of Edwardian leaders." Clearly, Jonathan Edwards' influence over the tribe he served lasted for many years after his death.

The ABCFM pulled its support after political difficulties within the tribe came to a head. The Stockbridge Mohicans separated into two parties. Although religion itself was not part of the dispute, the tribal church was eventually taken over by one party who claimed a seminary-educated Indian, Jeremiah Slingerland, as one of its members. Mr. Slingerland—not ordained as a minister until twenty years after he graduated from the seminary—presided over a much smaller tribe and a much smaller church than the one that existed under his predecessor. On an 1879 business trip to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, Jeremiah Slingerland declared that the Stockbridge Bible was "still kept and guarded like the terraphim of the Orientals."

Reverend Jeremiah Slingerland's death in 1884 essentially marked the end of the tribal church. While the Presbyterians made some attempt to get Slingerland's old church going again, for a short time a Roman Catholic congregation became more popular and then a Lutheran church and boarding school came into the picture and thrived. Although politics and land ownership issues for the Stockbridge Mohicans become too complex to accurately describe without losing a church history focus, a few sentences on the topic are necessary. This tribe of farming Indians was given two townships of land in Shawano County, Wisconsin that was not good for farming. Within a few decades of the establishment of the Shawano County reservation, US Indian policy aimed at eliminating reservations and tribal governments. As a result, the tribe became an unorganized cultural entity. In this context of loss and poverty, the whereabouts of the Stockbridge Bible be-came something of a mystery.

In 1908, Rev. Earl North wrote of the establishment of a new Presbyterian church for the Stockbridge Mohicans. The re-surfacing of the Stockbridge Bible was a central element in the founding of this new church. According to North  
Several of the leading men of the tribe have for a number of months been wonderfully stirred on the subject of religion. The old Bible was found in a deserted house, and was carefully cleaned and put in a place of safety at the home of Jameson Quinney.

The pivotal day in the founding of the new church was September 29th, 1907. On that Sunday, the synodical superintendent preached a guest sermon to the Indians. According to Rev. North, that day marked the first time the scriptures were read from the Stockbridge Bible in a worship service in sixty years. After the service, a petition to start a new church was placed on top of the historic Bible. Forty-five adults signed the petition; some of the older ones had tears in their eyes.

Less than twenty-five years later, the same church sent the tribal Bible back to Stockbridge, Massachusetts where it was a museum piece for the next sixty years. On the one hand, the small congregation was desperate for money, but on the other hand, poverty was not a new thing for the Stockbridge Mohicans. As the last speakers of the Mohican language died, it appears that members of the tribe stopped attributing religious significance to the Stockbridge Bible. The Presbyterian congregation was rather small, making up only a fraction of the tribe and for many years few of the Stockbridges knew what had happened to their historic Bible. It took a series of historical trips back east to trigger the desire to ask for the two volumes to be returned. From 1975 to 1989, the Stockbridge Mohicans' re-organized tribal government made efforts to get their ancestors' special Bible back. After many years, museum officials finally accepted the fact that the tribe had a moral claim on the Stockbridge Bible and returned it in a March 11, 1991 ceremony.

I have talked with many of today's Stockbridge Mohicans about the Stockbridge Bible and have yet to hear any of them attach any kind of religious significance to it. Instead, the predominant view is that the two large volumes were simply crumbs that fell from the British table, possibly an inducement to take up arms against the French and France's Native allies. Understandably, the Indians direct a healthy amount of cynicism towards the colonizers. Church attendance on the reservation is comparable to national levels, and "Native spirituality" is being practiced more and more both by Christian and non-Christian Stockbridge Mohicans.<sup>3</sup>