# *The Haystack Monument at Williams College*

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Figure 1. Haystack Monument, Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts. Photo by author.

The Haystack Monument at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, commemorates the location, in the summer of 1806, where five students sheltered during a storm and made a pledge to spread the Gospel across the world (fig. 1). They were living during the Second Great Awakening in New England, a Protestant movement that, following a progressive social agenda, believed all people were worthy of salvation. This meeting at Williams led to the founding of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), an organization that grew into a powerful force for both cultural imperialism and humanitarianism throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The legend of the Haystack Meeting was celebrated at Williams on its fiftieth anniversary in 1856.[1] In 1857 alumni established Mission Park on acreage purchased for this purpose and established an association incorporated under state law for "improving the grounds . . . known as the Mission Park, and of erecting and placing thereon suitable monuments and other memorials, to commemorate the origin and progress of American Missions." Then, in 1866, an alumnus visiting from Cleveland, Ohio, decided to donate funds to erect the first and only permanent tribute on the site. The resulting Haystack Monument was set in place and dedicated in the summer of 1867.

In the *Wall Street Journal* of December 9, 2016, Jennifer Braceras, a Boston lawyer, wrote a piece about "contextualizing" historical monuments on college campuses, using the Haystack Monument as her focus. She contended that explicating the circumstances behind monuments simply gives the "perpetually aggrieved" another reason to complain. She provocatively titled her piece "Those Imperialistic Christian Missionaries" and quoted the *Christian Examiner* saying that the administration was contemplating its removal.[2] It was this odd criticism of historical context that piqued my interest.

There are numerous colleges in the United States that have a strong history of training missionaries, both men and women. How that history is understood and represented today is thrown into relief by Braceras's article. Interestingly enough, Haystack is one of a very few monuments to the missionary movement in New England—outside of a few plaques and a historical bench. Most colleges with a strong missionary history, unless they are still evangelical, downplay their past and their adventurous missionary alumni in order to avoid religious and political fallout. In this paper I examine the original meaning of the Haystack Monument on the Williams College campus in the context of current "monumental troubles" and ask how its presence might be addressed.

The challenge in comparing contemporary attitudes versus historical commemorations, of course, is to understand the original intentions behind the commission and measure them against how the monument resonates with today's public. In the case of the Haystack Monument, we are faced with a very explicit event and documented effect—a historical meeting, the (eventual) formation of an organization that grew astronomically during the nineteenth century, and a powerful and nearly universal local belief in the righteousness of the work that organization did. Attitudes about religion have changed, mostly among the educated elite, who no longer prize faith as in the past. The rest of the world has, if anything, become more devoutly religious. At Williams College we have contemporary voices raising a modern critical reassessment of the Christian religion and America's role in world politics at an institution of higher learning that recruits students from across the world and of every cultural background for a liberal arts education. Williams prides itself on degrees that equip students to ask foundational questions about the reasons literature was written, laws were enacted, policies were set, and monuments and artworks were made. Nevertheless, international pilgrims also continually make the journey to visit the Haystack Monument as a devotional act. It thus stands in the midst of a thriving place of intellectual debate where most residents are unaware of its meaning and on a private campus that is a popular destination for Protestant world travelers. Though at first sight the marble sculpture itself is relatively innocuous, further examination of both the physical location and the historical documentation brings to the fore the strong ideology that underpinned its commission.

Let us first examine Haystack's form and physical setting at Williams College. The Haystack Monument sits alone in a wooded island in the middle of the south area of the campus, offering a visual center point and resting spot (note the presence of benches situated to afford a view of the engraved side of the piece), crisscrossed daily by students who live in nearby dorms.


Figure 2. Haystack Monument, Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts. Photo by author.

The monument is composed of Berkshire marble quarried at Alford, Massachusetts, and was made in workshops of the Berkshire Marble Company during the Spring of 1867 (fig. 2). It is twelve feet high, finished with a polished surface resulting in a silvery blue color. The tapering shaft, cape, and base are surmounted with a globe three feet in diameter, traced in map lines. On its eastern face and immediately below the globe are inscribed the words, "The Field is the World." Below the inscription is a rough approximation of the original haystack, sculpted in bold relief and encircled with the words "The Birthplace of American Foreign Missions, 1806." Finally, in the lowest register, are the names of the five men.

About fifty feet away, a plaque was erected in 2006 (the bicentennial of the Haystack Meeting) to explain the meaning of the monument seen in the near distance (fig. 3):

*Haystack Monument*

*On this site in the shelter of a haystack during a summer storm in 1806 five Williams College students dedicated their lives to the service of the Church around the globe. Out of their decision grew the American Foreign Mission movement.*

Orators, speaking at the dedication in 1867, treated the spot as sacred landscape, or holy ground. The area is now dotted with campus buildings as the college has expanded all around what was once a bordering field.

Although erected sixty-one years after the event it commemorates, the Haystack Monument was conceived at a time of even greater zeal in the work the event generated, at the height of the world missionary movement and at the conclusion of the American Civil War that would change many of the directives of missionary societies and attitudes toward training and personnel. Rather than


Figure 3. Plaque near Haystack Monument, Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts. Photo by author.

reflecting the views of a split society—as in the American South where historical monuments went up during the peak of oppressive Jim Crow laws as visible reminders by those in power to those who were not—at Williams there was general agreement among administration, alumni, and townsfolk about this project. (Students were more mixed in their beliefs and few were evangelical; in both 1856 and 1867 there was not a large student contingent present at the ceremonies, and speakers spoke to the danger of secularization from newly formed fraternities.) Nevertheless, the Haystack Monument was raised when feelings generally ran high across New England that those five young men had made a selfless offer that would grow to become what many came to consider a humanitarian movement. The Second Great Awakening had taken rural New England by storm, and a homegrown brand of Protestant beliefs, updated from their Calvinistic origins, became a source of pride in the area, although there were certainly people critical of religious zeal, even in the early nineteenth century, and Williams was not founded as a religious college (ironic as it may seem for the origin of the American missionary movement).

To be fair, Haystack is not situated in the location where missionary cultural imperialism was effected, to stand as a marker of foreign intervention among the people who were targeted by these American crusaders. It is not in the Middle East or India or Africa or any of the other foreign mission stations; neither is it in Georgia or Ohio, among the many domestic states that New England missionaries targeted as in need of enlightenment. Instead, it stands at “home.”

Nevertheless, the Haystack Monument shares a celebration of superiority—of racism, of colonial attitudes—with Confederate monuments. Northerners were flush with victory, but it appears they did not make a connection between the slavery they had just fought to end, with its attendant attitudes about the inferior status of black people, and the missionary zeal that stemmed from convictions that non-New England Protestants were “benighted heathens” (a term used repeatedly by missionaries that was repeated in the dedication speeches and even the 1906 centennial celebration). It might have seemed, to New Englanders who supported the ongoing benevolent work demanded by America’s religious Manifest Destiny, that they shared national celebration of a common interest. Samuel Mills Jr., son of a minister and the student who supposedly led the idea to take the Gospel abroad in 1806 at the Haystack, said that though they were only “little beings,” their influence should extend to the ends of the earth.[3] Indeed, New England Protestants were already working on missions in American frontier towns, trying to change the beliefs of Native Americans and even African slaves. These students were simply expanding the cultural imperialism of their elders to a wider scope.

Haystack is not a monument to soldiers or the glory of the dead, nor to statesmen or democratic ideals, and it is not a memorial (a commemoration of the dead) but a monument to a singular yet minor event. Before the voices of the colonized were validated, Haystack would seem to have stemmed from peace rather than war, from gain rather than loss, from new (spiritual) life rather than death. It assumes a hegemonic acceptance of the actions that led from the beginning made in this field, and its supporters claimed a moral imperative in its existence intrinsic to the universal understandings, held by the Euro-white men who administered the nation, of history and American purpose. (And of course, it is a monument by men, to men, and for men's edification. Williams was a men's college both in 1806 and 1867 [coed since 1970], and official missionaries were men—women who went were either wives or 'assistants,' no matter how much responsibility they might have held.) Haystack is intended to keep the memory alive of something that had come to be considered significant by the time of the commission. As Williams' President Hopkins said in his address at the dedication, "Monuments commemorate the past. This is well; but only as such commemoration strengthens the principles that underlie the event and movement commemorated."[4] So what happens to a monument whose raison d'être is no longer significant? Or has even become unwanted? That is the key question that faces so many communities today and with which we grapple at this conference.

Monuments that were built to honor the other white American leaders of westward expansion, as Erika Doss documents, have been the targets of angry retaliation and judicious administrative modification during the past thirty years.[5] One example, which is a form of stone marker similar to the Haystack Monument, is the Seventh US Cavalry Memorial in "Custer Cemetery," North Dakota, where what Doss has quoted as "defeat empathy" trumped recognition of the actual Native American victors of Little Bighorn.[6] At Williams College, conflicted understanding of the original circumstances behind the Haystack Monument are less acute, and though some students have questioned its appropriateness, there has been no active call for its removal or defacement. Certainly, most of the men in question had racist attitudes, but they did not kill or drive out those they considered inferior, rather they tried to bring about what they considered great improvements in their spiritual lives and even physical standards of living. It is only with postcolonial awareness that we can see how much damage they effected along the way.

Over time, the originating fervor and sense of holy ground at Haystack was lost as the missionary ethos waned in New England. Yet if a monument is meant to engender respect for the people whose actions it visibly commemorates, it behooves us to look at the issue from the perspective of its viewers. Celebrating the accomplishments of the ABCFM also condones the impact of missionaries on the lives of people they targeted. It is that history implicit in this monument that must be redressed. As Williams College president Adam Falk asked in 2015, "What should be done about historical images that portray Williams as less welcoming than we are or aspire to be?"[7]

Commemorative events at Williams College in 1856, 1906, and 1957 slowly shifted the flavor of appreciation for the early missionaries from conversion to humanitarian service, from Christian faith to Christian morality. In fact, by 1957 there was a decided emphasis on the role of missionaries in abolition and Civil Rights—an interesting corollary to the monuments going up at that time in the South that are now also being reassessed. Monument reevaluation has had many outcomes. From removal to modification, defacement, relocation, or revisionist overwriting, there can be many layers of history embodied in a longstanding installation. Once a monument is removed, markers of historical beliefs, for good or ill, are erased with it. If left in place and resistance is drawn to it, a monument can serve to express changing values and teach lessons about past mistakes. However, it can also undermine them if the viewing public does not understand, does not know the history of the subject, and only sees the efforts to right the historical wrong as criminal vandalism. Symbolism only works as long as the audience understands the references. This is the reason so much art is now incomprehensible to museum attendees who may not have learned classical mythology, studied the politics of evolving borders, or learned the cultural markers of foreign societies.

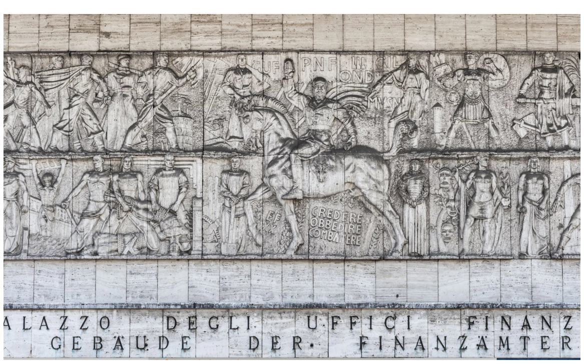


Figure 4. Hans Piffrader, detail of monumental bas-relief with Mussolini on horseback, 1939–42, Casa Littoria, Bolzano, Italy. Photo credit: *The Guardian*, December 6, 2017 (imagebroker/Rex/Shutterstock).

There are actually workable models for Braceras's "contextualization" or even Doss's "semiotic disobedience" (figs. 4, 5).[8] One example is how the town of Bolzano, in Italy, handled a monumental frieze with an equestrian portrait of Mussolini as a Roman emperor inscribed with the Fascist motto "Credere, Obbedire, Combattere" (Believe, Obey, Fight"). Rather than removing such a key historical marker in Bolzano's modern struggle, they hosted a competition to create a response to it. The winning submission did not touch the original artwork but instead projected the words of Hannah Arendt—"Nobody has the right to obey"—over it in three languages (the local Ladin, the original German, and Italian). Neither preserving nor destroying a fascist marker, the town decided to defuse and complicate it, engendering dialogue about their complicated past.

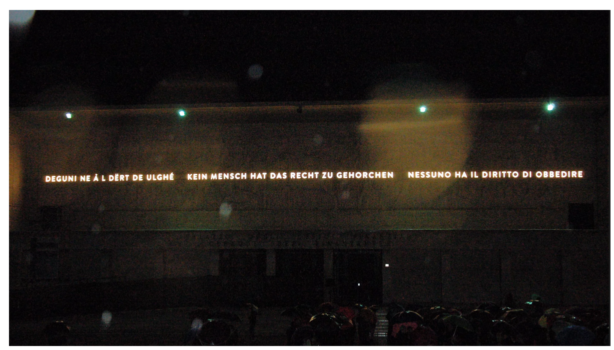


Figure 5. Arnold Holzknecht and Michele Bernardi, LED script of Hannah Arendt quote over Piffrader bas-relief, 2017, Casa Littoira, Bolzano, Italy. Photo credit: *The Guardian*, December 6, 2017 (Città di Bolzano).

Another model is right at Williams College and was the visual representation that sparked formation of a committee to review consideration of various visual markers on campus, beginning with a painting recently uncovered during

Figure 6. *The Bloody Morning Scout*, 1942, The Log, Williamstown, Massachusetts. Photo credit: *The Williams Record*, April 20, 2016.

renovations. In 1942, a mural entitled "The Bloody Morning Scout" (fig. 6) was painted in one room of The Log, a food and gathering space just off campus. It represents a historical event, the 1755 battle of Lake George with allied British and Mohawk leaders. The stereotypical figures are hierarchical and unfortunate. Once the mural came to light, the question of how to treat it was posed. During 2016–17, the campus-wide committee grappled with the definitions and functions of "decoration" and "historical images" on campus. They also noted Yale College's simultaneous concerns, quoting from their deliberations the "ongoing obligation . . . to navigate change without effacing the past."[9] The committee found that conversations generated about the painting at The Log caused many at Williams to think critically about their institutional history for the first time. For this reason, they advised leaving it in place but also recommended providing flexible and discursive information and interaction with it so that it can draw more revealing discussions. Haystack will soon be the stimulus behind "The Field Is the World," a two-part exhibition project for Fall Semester 2018 that takes stock of documents and artifacts in collections across the Williams campus that elucidate the (uncomfortable) history of the relationship between Williams College and the sovereignty and cultural production of Hawaii.

So, for me, Haystack presents a quandary (especially relevant to our discussions at this conference about institutional accountability). On the one hand, it is not an unattractive old monument on an otherwise nondescript area of campus landscape, and it is not overtly racist, like for instance the Massachusetts state seal with a Native American pictured under an arm wielding a sword with the bellicose motto ("By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty") or the mid-twentieth-century sculpture of a missionary, De Smet, praying over two Native Americans, now in the Saint Louis University Museum of Art's "Jesuit Collection" after being removed from an exterior location on campus.[10] Until 2006, when the plaque was erected to explain Haystack's meaning, one had to look hard to figure out that the orb was a globe and what it might mean. Its generalized classical base is simple (certainly better than the donor's initial idea to erect an actual marble haystack!), while the fact of a monument creates a meeting place, a moment to pause and contemplate both nature and history. In addition, many dozens of foreign pilgrims—mostly descendants of missionary converts—visit the site annually.

On the other hand, as much as the individual stories of the missionaries, especially the women, fascinate me, I find their brand of American religious absolutism unfortunate and some of the attitudes they helped engender about foreign cultures downright obstructive in current American foreign policy. As a historian, I want to see artifacts of the past in order to better understand how we got where we are now. Yet historical glorification should sometimes be undone.

The missionary industry was once a powerful New England institution, driving the formation of social and humanitarian organizations, technology, and American geopolitical statesmanship. Throwing out the bath water also ejects the baby: some of the most accomplished alumnae and effective organizations were involved in the movement, and they saw themselves dedicating their lives to the betterment of people less fortunate than themselves. The ABCFM became dominant in New England's history of religious influence on the entire country, and it became active in national foreign policy as missionaries' reports disseminated information and attitudes about many cultures long before diplomats encountered them. It was really not that different from humanitarian aid workers, altruistic physicians, or philanthropic organizations who focus on third world countries today. They too go with ideals of Western scientific, technological, and cultural superiority that these altruistic workers believe can effect positive change yet are similarly embedded in a heightened sense of agency. Trying to erase the missionary past does not allow much room for learning from it; yet we do not have to passively accept how history has marked itself on our era.

In fact, Williams College is currently very aware of the dilemma presented by such a monument as Haystack and, at least since 1956, has made an increasingly strong case for the selfless humanitarian-type service the Haystack-era students might have represented. During the 2006 commemoration events, organized between the college and many local churches, conversion was downplayed and a new idea, "social justice," was emphasized by many as a broad goal of mission service. In addition, some very critical lenses were applied to missionary history. Now administrators are trying to initiate campus conversations that address any institutional history ripe for reevaluation. Perhaps Mission Park might be a good place to install a counter-monument that could mark twenty-first-century concerns and permanently offer a revisionist view of missionary history to open up discursive consideration of all service, then and now, targeting the "less fortunate." This way, not only students but all visitors would be encouraged to think about the broader implications of the Haystack Meeting. If the choice is made by the administration to remove the monument, a learning opportunity—especially at an educational institution—could be lost. Rather than an erasable embarrassment, this marker might serve to point out both the accomplishments and the problematic ideology of ambitious alumni both past and future. Not all history is pretty, and attitudes about it vary over time (as they clearly have at Williams College). Sometimes, rather than trying to pretend things didn't happen, it might be better to face them and continue to evaluate their impact, whether for good or ill.

[1] Primary documentation on the plans for the Haystack Monument and events commemorating the original event can be found in the archives at Williams College, particularly MC-27, box 1. The curators there were most helpful in assisting me, especially Jessika Drmacich-Flach. Karen Swann helped me find the appropriate Williams staff for more information. Karen Merrill sent me a copy of the 2015 report of the Committee on Campus Space and Institutional History, which she chaired, along with helpful advice. Charles Dew offered observed history of the monument on campus.

Sonnet Coggins told me of Williams' ongoing engagement with these issues, including the Fall 2018 exhibition*.* Megan Maher kindly forwarded a copy of her 2017 senior thesis on this subject.

[2] Jennifer C. Braceras, "Those Imperialistic Christian Missionaries," *Wall Street Journal* December 9, 2016, A15.

[3] "Though you and I are very little beings, we must not rest satisfied till we have made our influence extend to the remotest corner of this ruined world." Samuel J. Mills to Elias Cornelius, quoted in Thomas C. Richards, *Samuel J. Mills, missionary pathfinder, pioneer and promoter* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1906; on archive.org accessed 30 July 2018), 20.

[4] Mark Hopkins, Haystack Monument Dedication, July 28, 1867, Introductory Address.

[5] Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 328–76.

[6] Ibid., 337, fig. 6.

[7] Final Report, Committee on Campus Space and Institutional History, March 17, 2017.

[8] Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 361.

[9] Letter to President Adam Falk from Committee on Campus Space and Institutional History, March 17, 2017, 2.

[10] This monument is actually more complicated than it looks; there are currently strong supporters of De Smet, who claim he actually defended Native Americans from rapacious white settlers and military troops. The choice of composition may have led to more negative discourse than his legacy deserves but the entire concept of missionary superiority and conversion is, of course, nevertheless suspect.