

Summary of Charlotte White's Untold Story

Charlotte Hazen Atlee (1782 – 1863) was born in Lancaster, PA into an Episcopalian family. Her father was a PA Supreme Court judge. Charlotte became an orphan when she was eleven. She was likely sent to live with her oldest sister in Rutland, MA. Later she met and married Nathaniel White, a merchant in Rutland. They had one son. Her husband died four months after the baby's birth. The baby died five months later.

Widowed and childless, Charlotte moved to Haverhill, MA. In 1806 she came to faith in Jesus, was baptized in the Merrimack River and joined Haverhill's Baptist Church. My book tells about the Congregationalists and Baptists in and around Haverhill and especially their growing interest in foreign mission. Not incidentally, Harriet Atwood lived in Haverhill and Ann Hasseltine lived just across the Merrimack River in Bradford. In 1812 Ann married Adoniram Judson and Harriet married Samuel Newell. Shortly after the weddings, the Congregationalists ordained Judson and Newell, along with Luther Rice, Gordon Hall and Samuel Nott and appointed them as missionaries. They did not appoint their wives. In February 1812 the Judsons and Newells sailed for India from Salem, MA while Rice, Gordon and Nott sailed from Philadelphia.

As is well known, the Judsons and Luther Rice came to a Baptist understanding of baptism and were immersed by William Ward, a British Baptist missionary working with William Carey in India. The Americans were not allowed to remain in India. The Judsons eventually got to Burma to join William Carey's son Felix in his mission work. Rice returned to America to help Baptists form a mission society.

Meanwhile, Charlotte had moved to Philadelphia and joined the Sansom Street Baptist Church in its new round building. In May, 1814 Baptists from eleven states and the District of Columbia met in Philadelphia and organized the "General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States of America For Foreign Mission." The Convention was called the "Triennial Convention" because it met every three years. It was the first national Baptist organization formed for international mission. It would later change its name to the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, now known as American Baptist International Ministries. The Convention formed a "Baptist Board of Foreign Missions" to conduct the ongoing work of missionary appointment, instruction and oversight. As soon as it was formed, the Board appointed Adoniram Judson as its first missionary. The Board did not appoint Ann, nor did it appoint missionary wives that followed her. Instead it considered Ann and these women to be volunteer "assistant missionaries" to their husbands. Five weeks after Judson was appointed, Charlotte White helped form and lead the Sansom Street Baptist Female Society for Promoting Evangelical Missions, one of the very early women's missionary societies.

The next year, 1815, the Board appointed George Hough and Charlotte White to join the Judson mission work in Burma. Charlotte's appointment caused a huge controversy because she was a woman instead of being an ordained man. The Charlotte White biography gives details about the controversy and the attempt to get the Board to revoke Charlotte's appointment. It tells of attitudes about women missionaries in the context of the conflicting attitudes about women preachers. (I highly recommend the book *Strangers and Pilgrims. Female Preaching in America 1740-1845* by Catherine A. Brekus. Chapel Hill:

The University of North Carolina Press, 1998 which tells about more than 100 American women preachers in that time period and sheds much light on society's gender bias during Charlotte White's life time.)

The ship carrying Charlotte White and the Houghs departed from Philadelphia before the attempt to revoke Charlotte's appointment could succeed, however, seven months later the Board passed a resolution that "it will not be expedient in the future, as far as they can now Judge, to make appointment of an unmarried female missionary."

The biography also tells Charlotte's story in the context of the process by which other women began to be appointed as missionaries. That started in 1821 when the Board began appointing single women for service among the Cherokee and other Native American nations in North America. It was not until 1912 that American Baptists finally began appointing married women equally with their missionary husbands.

Charlotte White and the Houghs arrived first in Calcutta, India to pick up a printing press that the British Baptist missionaries were donating to the Judsons to publish the translations of scripture and religious tracts that Adoniram and Ann were completing. In Calcutta it took two months to find a ship that could take the Houghs and Charlotte White to Rangoon. During that time, Charlotte met and married Rev. Joshua Rowe, a British Baptist missionary who was a widower with three young sons.

Instead of proceeding to Burma, Charlotte served with Joshua in India under the auspices of the British Baptist Missionary Society. They served about 360 miles northwest of Calcutta at a village called Digah. Charlotte demonstrated her strong linguistic skills by learning Hindi and writing a "Hindustani Spelling Book" to help teach local Hindi-speaking children. Charlotte was a strong advocate for education of girls and women. Against significant opposition, she started girls schools, taught classes, trained local women as teachers, negotiated with indigenous leaders for sites to construct schools and then oversaw those schools. Along with her educational work, Charlotte started and led Hindi-language worship services among local people.

Charlotte and Joshua had twin daughters and a son. Joshua died leaving Charlotte at Digah as a single parent of six children, overseeing ten schools and several worship sites while managing the mission without any fellow missionaries to assist. A fascinating part of the story told in the biography is how Charlotte earned and used personal funds to self-fund all of her eleven years as a missionary! Financial pressures eventually forced Charlotte to sail to England to seek official appointment by the English Baptists.

The biography follows the story of Charlotte and her children, their three years in England, their eventual return to the United States and their activities in America until Charlotte's death. It then goes on to show how Charlotte Hazen Atlee White Rowe was systematically written out of histories being written about American Baptist mission work. Only in the late 1900s did references begin to appear about her, but these have been fragmentary, very incomplete and frequently contain inaccuracies.