



The Pawnee Mission Letters, 1834-1851

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Rev. John Dunbar and Samuel Allis set out in 1834 to establish a mission to Indians beyond the Rocky Mountains. Unable to obtain a guide and with only a vague knowledge of the West, they instead encountered the Pawnee Indians in Nebraska. It was the beginning of a twelve-year odyssey to convert the tribe to Protestant Christianity and New England “civilization.” Dunbar and Allis traveled with the Pawnees on buffalo hunts and spent time at their villages, recording the customs and habits of the tribe. After a permanent community was established, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions sent additional missionaries and conflicts over conversion methods ensued, nearly destroying the mission community. The mission was eventually abandoned in 1846, when hostilities between the Sioux and the Pawnees escalated.

This collection of letters written by and to the missionaries, as well as their journal entries, illustrates the life of the mission, from the everyday complications of building and maintaining a community far from urban areas, to the navigation of the bureaucratic policies of the federal government and the American Board, to the ideological differences of the Pawnees’ multiple missionaries and the ensuing rift within the community. These writings provide a unique and personal portrayal of this small white community in the heart of the Pawnees’ domain.

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