

Megan Musgrove

Professor Karen Redding

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“The Force of an Early Care”: An Exploration of the Bray Schools through Literature

In the mid-eighteenth century, a group of English and American philanthropists known as the Associates of Dr. Bray chartered several charity schools dedicated to educating and catechizing slave children. The Bray schools were among the first of their kind. The unique nature of the Associates’ project makes it well worth the attention of modern social and religious historians. It is known that each of the first two schools received the same collection of literature upon their founding. It included sermons by the Reverend Thomas Bacon, early textbooks, and the *Book of Common Prayer*. I will analyze selections of this literature and consider what they reveal about the Associates’ motives for their work. The title of my proposal comes from one of Bacon’s sermons.

The Associates of Dr. Bray was one of three London-based philanthropic societies founded by Dr. Thomas Bray, an Anglican minister. His goal was to bring the Christian message—salvation from sin through faith in Jesus Christ—to Native Americans and African slaves. He knew that education had a vital role to play in achieving this goal, and at least two of the three organizations are known to have established schools. The Associates’ focus was on North America. James Oglethorpe, the first governor of Georgia, was a founding member.

With the help of Benjamin Franklin, the first Bray school opened in Philadelphia in 1757. It was so successful that in 1760, Franklin was made a member of the Associates to assist with the establishment of more schools. All the teachers were female so that female students could

learn to sew and knit. The only exception was the Philadelphia school, which was overseen by both a male minister and a female teacher. Students learned to read, spell, and to recite the Anglican creeds and catechisms. The ratio of male to female students was relatively equal. This is significant given the low literacy rates among white females in America, particularly in the Southern colonies, at that time. Interest in the Bray schools within the modern academic community was renewed in 2010 when it was discovered that a building on the campus of the College of William and Mary in Virginia was rented to the Associates in the 1760's, most likely to hold classes for the Bray school at Williamsburg. If this is correct, then that building is the oldest in America to be used for the education of African-Americans. One Williamsburg student, Gowan Pamphlet, went on to establish one of the first black Baptist churches in the country, the doors of which are still open today.

What do the literary selections I will analyze reveal about the Associate's motivations for undertaking such an extraordinary project? I propose they will reveal much. Analyses of these texts will lead to hypotheses about the majority view of these gentlemen concerning slaves, theology, and education. A cross-examination of their personal correspondence should be sufficient to confirm or deny my hypotheses. For maximum clarity, I will discuss each text as a separate entity. I will examine them in the broader context of Anglican history and theology and of American and English social and religious history.

My primary sources will be two of the six sermons sent to the first Bray headmistresses, a peer-reviewed book on early American textbooks, and a peer-reviewed journal article on the role of *The Book of Common Prayer* in the lives of the eighteenth-century Anglican laity. The specific sermons I have chosen are those that focus on behavioral expectations for slaves and their masters. The article places the *Book of Common Prayer* in the context of English history.

The selection I will utilize from the book on American education gives a history of early textbooks and their role in American education and social history. The letters with which I will be cross-examining the aforementioned texts are preserved in *Religious Philanthropy and Colonial Slavery: The American Correspondence of the Associates of Dr. Bray, 1717-1777*, a book compiled and edited by John C. Van Horne. Including these letters in my research will essentially allow the Associates to speak for themselves.

My target audience is academic researchers specializing in English and American social history. Experts on eighteenth-century slavery and/or the Anglican church should be especially interested. My desire is to bring the Bray schools to their attention, showing them the uniqueness of the Associates' work. For those already familiar with the Bray schools, I want to challenge them to look more deeply into the hearts of the men behind them. Finally, I want to show my entire audience the prominence of the Christian gospel in the Associates' thoughts and its centrality to their goals.