

Letter from Lucy B. Armstrong to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1849

Introduction

Lucy B. Armstrong, born in 1818 in Upper Sandusky, Ohio, where her father worked as a Methodist missionary on the nearby Wyandotte Indian Reservation. Her husband, John McIntyre Armstrong, was a quarter Wyandotte and devout Methodist like his wife. Lucy Armstrong was adopted by the Wyandotte Nation following her marriage. John was admitted to the Ohio bar association in 1839. The couple returned to the Wyandotte reservation in 1840 to fight against another removal by the state government. Despite the wishes of the Wyandottes to remain on the land ceded them, they were forcibly removed to Kansas in 1843.

Lucy Armstrong, her husband, and the Wyandotte Nation settled on a strip of ground lying between the west line of Missouri & the Kansas river, where Kansas City, KS now stands. Lucy and her husband established a Methodist Church, taught in the school (which they built), and served as distinguished members of Tribal Council. In 1854, Kansas Territory erupted in violence over the issue of slavery in the impending state of Kansas. Lucy Armstrong witnessed Bleeding Kansas first hand. After Kansas was finally admitted as a state in 1859, Lucy Armstrong attended the Constitutional Convention every day, advising the (male) delegates from the gallery.

The conflict over slavery split the Methodist Church into the Northern Methodist Church, opposed to slavery, and the Methodist Church, South, which supported slavery and its expansion. An 1849 directive from the Bureau of Indian Affairs replaced the northern missionary on the Wyandotte reservation with a pro-slavery missionary from the southern church. Lucy Armstrong penned the following letter in response to the changes.¹

Primary Source

Wyandotte Nation
Jan. 4th 1849

Dear Sir²,

I will make no other apology for addressing you than our friendship and the position you occupy in community. It is well known to all, that the conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in

¹ [Original source from Kansas Memory is believed to be in the public domain.](#)

² Orlando Brown, Commissioner of Indian Affairs.

the slave holding States have seceded from the parent Church and have found themselves into “a distinct ecclesiastical organization under the name of the “Methodist Episcopal Church South.”³

A majority of the members of the Wyandotte Society have refused to go with the succession and have sought and obtained a missionary from the Methodist Episcopal Church.⁴

An effort is now being made by slave-holding missionaries and Government Agents to induce the Indian Department to expel our missionary from among us, and thus deprive us of our religious rights.

We reside West of the State of Missouri where the compromise act forever excludes Slavery and we think that a slave-holding ministry ought not to be forced upon us, to the exclusion of the one of our Choice.⁵ Dr. A. Stile the Presiding Elder of this District resides in the State of Missouri.⁶ The Government Agent threaten strongly that they will prohibit him from coming among us any more to hold our quarterly meeting. We think it a hard case that if after compelling us in a to leave our Sweet Ohio the government should not allow us to seek our own church relations.⁷

The Missionaries of the Church South bring their Slaves right in among us and engage in the traffic before our eyes. There are now about twenty negro slaves in the Shawnee and Wyandotte Territory. It has a very bad affect upon the real Indian, it confirms him in his preconceived notion that labor is dishonourable.

Although slavery is the main objection we have to the new church yet we distinctly disclaim being abolitionists, but residing on free soil we desire to have nothing to do with and consider the matter here as settled. Now as a personal friend and an acquaintance I have turned to you for assistance. Can you not create interest sufficient for us in Washington to induce the Indian Department to award to us our national inalienable religious rights.

Lucy Armstrong

³ The Methodist Episcopal Church split in 1844 over the issue of the Church’s support of slavery. Throughout the early nineteenth century, southern Methodist clergy preached that slavery was an essential part of Christian civilization while ministers in northern Methodist churches increasingly agreed with the abolitionist argument that slavery was unchristian and undemocratic. Following the rupture, the Northern Methodist Protestant Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South drew up a “Plan of Separation,” dividing the states into one church or the other. Both churches claimed the Kansas Territory congregations, many of which were located on Indian reservations. [Here is an interesting article with more information.](#)

⁴ Missionaries from both the northern and southern churches competed for Indian congregations, which continued to diverge on the issue of slavery – a particularly important issue in Kansas Territory where the fight over the expansion of slavery permeated every aspect of life. In 1849, Commissioner Brown abruptly replaced the northern missionary on the Wyandotte reservation with one from the southern church.

⁵ Surely you know the name of the Compromise of which she speaks.

⁶ The Wyandottes choice for missionary.

⁷ Indian removal out of Ohio started in the 1790s and continued well into the 1840s. The Wyandotte Nation were forcibly removed from their promised lands near Upper Sandusky, OH in 1843. This should be in your notes.