

This Week in Saratoga County History

Rev. Charles Finney Preston of Galway: Presbyterian Missionary to Canton, China.

Submitted by Alan Maddaus May 13, 2021

Alan Maddaus is the author of The Prestons of East Street – the Story of an 19th Century American Family, available at Amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com and other outlets. He can be reached at admaddaus@aol.com



Charles Preston, Union College
Ca. 1850



Rev. Charles Preston, Canton, China
Ca. 1877

Photos courtesy of the family of Laura Preston Chase

The Reverend Charles Preston arrived at the port of Hong Kong on May 12, 1854 after a voyage of 160 days from New York City - his final destination the city of Canton, China - where the Presbyterian Missionary Board had established a base of operation that included a school, hospital and chapel. There he would engage in his life's work: conversion of the Chinese to Christianity.

Charles Finney Preston was born in Antwerp, New York on July 26, 1829, the first child of Dr. and Mrs. Calvin Preston. His middle name was selected as a tribute to Charles Grandison Finney, a social activist and leader of the Second Great Awakening, a religious revival based on a vision of the second coming of Jesus Christ.

The Prestons moved to Galway in 1830, attracted to the village by a family connection and the potential for a thriving medical practice. They settled in the village on East St. where they built a six bedroom home and raised a large family.

In Galway Charles' mother groomed him for missionary service to China, a priority of the Presbyterian Church. Charles Preston studied at the Galway Academy under the guidance of the Reverend Gilbert Morgan, becoming a member of the Galway Presbyterian Church at the age of fourteen. He next attended Union College, graduating in 1850, and then Princeton Theological Seminary, where he completed a three-year course. He was commissioned missionary to China by the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions in 1853 and left by sailing merchant ship, the Horatio, departing from New York for Canton in November of that year.

His plan was to preach to the Chinese in their native language was side-tracked by an assignment to teach English in the Mission School, an approach to religious conversion that he opposed on philosophical grounds. This put Charles at odds with a well-connected leader of the China Mission and ultimately led to his death. He was rescued from this educational endeavor by the outbreak of the Second Opium War, a conflict primarily between Great Britain and the Qing dynasty over the insistence of the English to freely distribute opium to the Chinese. This was in turn driven by a massive trade in-balance associated with English consumption of tea from China. Rev. Preston relocated to Macau where he developed the language skills necessary to preach in the Cantonese dialect.

At the end of the War, Rev. Preston returned to Canton where he built a chapel with his own and donated funds. There he preached for many years returning to the United States only once, leaving a son to be educated in Windham, Connecticut schools. He would never see him again.

After 23 years of missionary service his health began to decline, probably due to chronic dysentery. His doctor recommended return to the United States, but Rev. Preston's plea for transfer on medical grounds was turned down due to "insufficient funds in the Mission treasury", or equally likely in retribution for his advocacy of preaching in the native language. In a desperate attempt to save his life his doctor sent him to Hong Kong to recover. He died six days later at the home of a missionary with his wife and six children at his side. He was buried in the Happy Valley cemetery in Hong Kong; an obelisk monument provided by his three brothers marks the grave with the inscription "I am only resting".

His wife and family returned to America where Charles' brothers William and Platt, wealthy mill owners in Waitsburg, Washington, came to their rescue.

A tribute to Rev. Preston in the Union College Archives concludes with: "He learned the Chinese language as few foreigners learn it. He became the most effective preacher among our missionaries and filled Canton with his Gospel."