

EDITOR'S EPILOGUE

While it is not unusual for separate articles in an issue of *The Chronicle* to have an unexpected connection, a particularly noteworthy such occurrence exists in this issue on **unexpected disruptions**. In addition, this connection itself is an illustration of the unexpected ways in which God works.

The article titled “Thomas S. McNeil: The Rest of the Story” only scratches the surface on the popularity of McNeil’s Pain Exterminator. One advertisement that appeared in 1906, for example, relates some details about its use beyond the United States.¹

How McNeil's Pain Exterminator Was Introduced Into Africa

In 1877, Rev. Joseph Gomer, enroute to the Dark Continent as a missionary of the United Brethren church, stopped over Sunday in Harrisburg,² Pa., and was the guest of J.X. Quigley, who was then the proprietor of the medicine. On Monday morning as Mr. Gomer was leaving for New York, Mr. Quigley donated \$8.00 worth of the exterminator, all they could get into his trunk, to be used among the natives. Before the year was out, it became such an excellent remedy for that warm climate that Mr. Gomer ordered a gross of the medicine and inside of six months he ordered a great gross.³ The exterminator has gained such a reputation on the west coast of Africa that wholesale houses now order it direct from the manufacturers in large quantities. The natives come down the rivers in their boats, bringing some products of the country, palm wine, cassada, etc., to trade it for McNeil's Pain Exterminator. Thus the medicine has been introduced into that country by missionaries, and has gained quite a reputation as a reliable family medicine.

Mambo Station, West Africa, July, 1887. McNeil Medicine Company: “Through the recommendation of your golden medicines by the Rev. Joseph Gomer, I have purchased many bottles. They have afforded me, my dear family, and the Sherbro people unquestionable reliefs from long standing, as well as recent complaints. To refuse a suffering Sherbro man or woman a dose of your medicines will be considered as the greatest unkindness. I am, dear sirs, yours truly.” T. J. SAWYER.⁴

Sherbro, West Africa, June 29, 1887. McNeil Medicine Company: “Your medicines have been extensively administered by us. They have met a long felt want in this country. Our people regard your Pain Exterminator as a panacea for all the ills which flesh is heir to.” D. F. WILBERFORCE.⁵

¹ *The York Daily*, July 18, 1906, page 6.

² This was not the only visit to Harrisburg by this missionary from Ohio. The May 8, 1889, *Harrisburg Telegraph*, page 1, reports he addressed the denomination’s Woman’s Missionary Society annual meeting at Memorial [First] UB church in Harrisburg.

³ That’s 1728 bottles, which is just one of the shipments sent to Sierra Leone.

⁴ T.J. Sawyer was a noted African merchant/publisher in Freetown, and a member of the Legislative Council of Sierra Leone.

⁵ Rev. Daniel Flickinger Wilberforce was a US-educated African serving in Sierra Leone as a United Brethren missionary and colonial-appointed chieftain. He was from the same church [Third UB] in Dayton as Joseph Gomer. At one time it was standard mission practice for Africans

McNeil's Pain Exterminator is sold in 15 States in the United States by thousands of druggists, also in Liverpool. England, as well in Africa. It is the best household medicine made.

Joseph Gomer was not only the missionary who introduced McNeil's Pain Exterminator to the continent of Africa, he played a unique and vital role in United Brethren missions in general and is considered the one person most responsible for the success of the extensive missionary work of the United Brethren Church in Sierra Leone – which strong connection with Lebanon Valley College was a major focus in the article titled “Mrs. Grace (Snyder) Martin.” The following brief biography summarizes his life and ministry.⁶

Joseph Gomer passed away on September 6, 1892. At that point, he and his wife, Mary, had served under the United Brethren mission board in Sierra Leone for 22 years, superintending our work there.

We established mission work in Sierra Leone in 1857, but our early efforts were frustrating and virtually fruitless. When the Gomers arrived in January 1871, we had been without missionaries for two years and had almost pulled out altogether. But almost immediately after the Gomers arrived, the work took off. Later that first year came the conversion of the powerful local chief, Thomas Stephen Caulker, who had been a thorn in the side to missionaries. Caulker and others told the Gomers, “We now see that Christianity isn't just a white man's religion.” You see, the Gomers were black – the first black United Brethren missionaries.

Joseph Gomer grew up on a farm near Battle Creek, Mich., and despite the prejudice of white classmates, managed to get some schooling. He served as a cook during the Civil War, and on his way back north from New Orleans, met a widow named Mary Green. They were married in 1865, settled in Dayton OH and became leaders in a predominantly black United Brethren church.

The Gomers applied for missionary service, but were initially rejected. Historian and former bishop William Hanby implied that their race had something to do with it, but it may have been more a case of Gomer not being a minister and lacking in education. Whatever the case, the Mission board was urged to reconsider the Gomers.

Joseph Gomer was a diplomat, a teacher, a peacemaker among the warring tribes. He became highly respected, and umpired many disputes among the Africans. He taught farming methods, which were applied on the mission's 40-acre farm. In 1875, he organized the first United Brethren church in Sierra Leone. History writers note their abilities, their dedication to the work, and their spiritual fervor. But they also cite the Gomers' skin color as a crucial difference-maker.

The Gomers went to Africa during a window of time in the 1800s during which white Christians were open to sending blacks as missionaries – but a window which didn't stay open long. Black Americans serving under white

to adopt or be assigned Anglicized names – usually after famous persons or the US persons “sponsoring” them through missionary offerings. In this case, the names comes from the noted British anti-slave advocate Wilber Wilberforce (1759-1833) and United Brethren bishop and missionary leader Daniel K. Flickinger (1824-1911).

⁶ Adapted from <https://ubcentral.org/2017/09/06/on-this-day-in-ub-history-september-6-joseph-gomer/> of the United Brethren Church as accessed 2/8/2021.

mission boards experienced lower pay, longer terms, shorter and less frequent furloughs, less promotion, and less educational benefits offered to their children. The longest term served during that period by a white UB missionary was 3.5 years, compared to terms of six, six, and ten years for the Gomers. But the Gomers' longevity in superintending the field for over 20 years speaks to the confidence placed in them by the UB Mission board.

By 1892, Joseph Gomer's health was failing and he planned to retire as mission superintendent. He and Mary had gone to Freetown with a couple who were sailing back to America. But Mr. Gomer was seized with apoplexy and died before medical help arrived. Mary Gomer stayed in Sierra Leone until 1894, and then returned to the States, where she died on December 1, 1896. He was without doubt the one missionary that rescued the United Brethren missions in Sierra Leone from almost certain failure. Today in Sierra Leone, the signature work of the Gomers lives on in thousands of lives who have never heard of them.

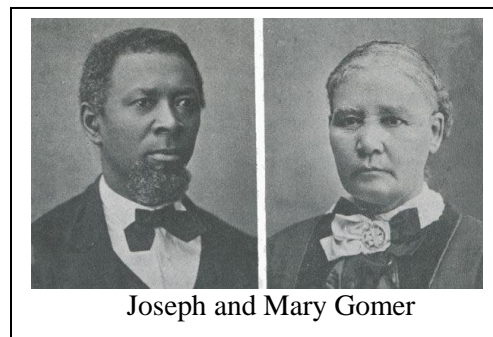
When Mrs. Gomer died in Dayton, an obituary notice appeared in the local paper, the first part of which is reproduced below – condescending and racist by today's standards, but typical of the culture of the era. Note that the paper even mistakenly gives a first name of Martha, while the denominational records and the gravesite records verify that the name is Mary.

Mrs. Martha Gomer, a Returned Missionary, Dies of Old Age.

For Years She and Her Husband Were Among Savages on the West Coast of Africa.

There passed away yesterday morning at her home on the West Side, a colored woman whose life had been far more interesting and notable than the lives of the people of that race generally are.

The deceased was Mrs. Martha Gomer, and she had been for many years a prominent figure in the mission work of the U. B. Church.



Joseph and Mary Gomer

Did Grace Martin ever use or dispense McNeil's Pain Exterminator in Sierra Leone? We may never know. But Joseph and Mary Gomer were an unexpected connection between Thomas McNeil and the ministry in Sierra Leone and an **unexpected disruption** in the stream of white missionaries that had been sent to Africa by the United Brethren Church. May God continue to send those unexpected connections and disruptions that enable us to relieve suffering and make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.