

## **Melinda Rankin (1811-1888)**

Melinda Rankin was born on March 21, 1811, in Littleton, New Hampshire. She taught school there until the 1840s when she moved west, like many people from New England did. Over the next 40 years, she worked as a teacher and missionary for the Protestant church. She traveled to many places, including the Southern U.S., the Rio Grande area, and Mexico, where she became the first Protestant missionary to establish lasting work in the country.

In 1840, Melinda heard that teachers were needed in the Mississippi Valley. The area had many new immigrants, many of whom were Catholic, so Protestant churches sent missionaries to spread their religion. Melinda was raised in a Protestant family, which made her strongly opposed to Catholicism. Protestantism had begun in Europe during the Reformation, which criticized the Catholic Church for corruption. By the 1840s, many people in the U.S. who descended from early Protestant colonists were against the growing number of Catholic immigrants and worked to stop the spread of Catholicism.

Melinda spent time in Kentucky before moving to Mississippi and Alabama in 1842, where she started schools and worked with poor communities. She later wrote that if she had listened to public opinion, she might have stayed home in New England instead of following her heart to spread her faith.

In 1846, the Mexican-American War began over Texas, which had been part of Mexico but was taken by American settlers. Many of these settlers did not follow agreements with the Mexican government, such as freeing enslaved people, leading to tensions. Texas declared independence in 1836, and after being admitted to the U.S. in 1845, war broke out between Mexico and the U.S. The war ended in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and Mexico surrendered Texas, along with the territories of New Mexico and California.

When the war ended in 1848, Melinda heard about the poor moral situation in Mexico, which was predominantly Catholic. She believed it was her duty to bring Protestant Christianity to the people there. She decided to begin her mission work in Texas, and later moved to Mexico when it was possible.

In 1852, Melinda traveled to Brownsville, Texas, across from Mexico. There, she opened a school and taught Bible lessons to the Spanish-speaking people. However, tensions with nearby Mexican revolutionaries made life difficult. Eventually, Melinda had to return to the East Coast to raise money for a new school. She raised enough money to build a new school in Brownsville, the Rio Grande Female Institute, which opened in 1854.

Despite challenges, including a yellow fever epidemic in 1858, Melinda continued her work. But in 1859, political unrest forced her to close her school. In 1862, Melinda saw an opportunity when a new Mexican Constitution allowed religious freedom, and she started a school in Matamoros, Mexico. Unfortunately, this effort was short-lived due to unstable conditions in Mexico.

Melinda returned to the U.S. by the fall of 1863, she became the heads of a school for recently freed African-Americans in New Orleans. In 1865, she made another attempt to set up a mission in Mexico. She faced many challenges, including the French invasion of Mexico and resistance from Catholic authorities, but she remained determined.

In 1872, after years of illness and political unrest, Melinda decided to retire. She moved to Bloomington, Illinois, where she lived with her nieces in 1875. Although her missionary work had ended, she had a lasting impact on the spread of Protestantism in Mexico and the U.S.

Melinda Rankin died on December 6, 1888 at the home of her niece, Amma Dick. She was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.