

Hillsborough and Beyond:  
William Mercer Green's Mission Field in the 1820s

Bicentennial Address at St. Matthew's, Hillsborough, NC  
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We recognize August 23, 1824 as the date when St. Matthew's was formally organized; we are now celebrating the bicentennial of that founding event.

This evening, I want to place that event in a broader context within the ministry of our founding priest, William Mercer Green, both before and after the organizing of St. Matthew's. Green's ministry was not limited to one parish, but extended across a mission field that ranged from Williamsboro to Raleigh and multiple points in between; St. Matthew's was not the only church he organized and served in the 1820s. By looking at Green's ministry in other places besides Hillsborough we can better appreciate both the totality of his ministry as well as the considerable challenges facing the diocese in the early years of its existence.

William Mercer Green was born in Wilmington in 1798. His father died when William Mercer was still a child, so he was raised by his mother and given a Quaker education. He attended UNC, graduating in the class of 1818 and taking 2<sup>nd</sup> honors behind only future President James K. Polk. After graduation, he married Sally Sneed of Williamsboro, and shortly thereafter he moved there to teach school and prepare for ordained ministry under the direction of Bishop Richard Channing Moore of Virginia, who was then providing Episcopal oversight in North Carolina as well.

No definitive account exists for Green's decision to enter the ordained ministry. Cornelia Phillips Spencer speculated that Green "became an Episcopalian, perhaps while in college. It was said his conversion and

entrance into the ministry was due to the impression made by reading the Life of Bishop Berkeley.”<sup>1</sup>

It is more likely that Green was influenced by his family connections to St. James parish in Wilmington. His English-born grandfather was an Anglican and buried in the St. James churchyard. Moreover, his older sister married Thomas Wright (1785-1835), a member of St. James who, like Green, was pursuing holy orders.<sup>2</sup>

At the time Green moved to Williamsboro in 1818, the Episcopal Church had just begun to get organized in North Carolina. There were a few isolated congregations along the coast, but no diocese and only one substantial parish: St. James, Wilmington. This meant there were no Episcopal visitations in North Carolina; no confirmation services; no deputies to General Convention.

The diocese was officially established in April 1817 with just three members of the clergy present and only four congregations represented: Wilmington, New Bern, Edenton, and Fayetteville—and the congregation in Fayetteville had been in existence for just two weeks at the time of the first convention!

When convention met a year later, in 1818, the number of clergy had grown from three to five. The situation was about to change appreciably, however, as five young men in North Carolina were preparing to enter the ministry, including William Mercer Green and his brother-in-law, Thomas Wright.<sup>3</sup>

The Episcopal Church, of course, was heir to the colonial Church of England, but from 1776 to 1817 there had been no effective organization here in North Carolina. So, what was left to build upon?

In several places, the Episcopal Church could take possession of long-dormant Anglican church buildings: that was true in Williamsboro and

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelia Phillips Spencer, “Old Times in Chapel Hill No. X—Bishop Green,” *University Magazine*, New Series vol. VIII, no. 1: 3.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Taylor Block, *Temple of Our Fathers: St James Church (1729-2004)* (Wilmington: n.p., 2004), 41-44.

<sup>3</sup> *Journal of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in North Carolina (1818)*: 6f; 9. Hereinafter abbreviated *NCDJ*

at St. Mary's Chapel in Orange County, where a simple wooden structure was still standing amidst the colonial churchyard. But in most communities, the old Anglican church buildings were long gone and their sites reclaimed for other uses—including in some cases the erection of Methodist and Presbyterian churches. Such was the case here in Hillsborough; the Presbyterian Church in town now stands where colonial St. Matthew's once stood.

So, Episcopalians had to start afresh, and hope that they could, through visiting communities and contacting family members with known ties to the church, build new congregations. To this end, the diocese established a missionary society in 1817 and started to raise funds to underwrite clergy who would travel to various communities in hopes of awakening (or reawakening) interest in the Episcopal Church.

By 1818, the missionary society was formally organized under the leadership of Duncan Cameron.<sup>4</sup> The first missionary appointed was John Phillips, who concentrated his efforts in Beaufort, Halifax, and Edgecombe counties, and who organized a congregation in Tarboro (Trinity).<sup>5</sup> He would subsequently be responsible for helping to start congregations in Raleigh and Warrenton.

From the first, William Mercer Green took an active interest in this missionary enterprise. While still engaged in preparing for the ministry, he took steps to organize a congregation in Williamsboro, and at the 1819 convention he presented the certificate of organization for St. John's and was seated as their lay delegate.<sup>6</sup> At the 1821 convention, Green was ordained deacon and could now join in missionary activities himself.

The 1821 missionary report from Green's brother-in-law, Thomas Wright (already a deacon), gives a snapshot of what such activity entailed. Wright conducted his missionary work between the months of July and October; it consisted of visiting, preaching, and baptizing. He

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<sup>4</sup> *NCDJ 2<sup>nd</sup>* (1818): 13, 14.

<sup>5</sup> *NCDJ 3<sup>rd</sup>* (1819):11.

<sup>6</sup> *NCDJ 3<sup>rd</sup>* (1819): 4.

reported visiting Chapel Hill, Pittsboro, Milton, Halifax, and Wadesboro once; visiting Caswell, Raleigh, Oxford, the Haw River meeting house, Salisbury, Lincolnton and Lumberton twice; Warrenton and St. Jude's, Orange County four times; and Williamsboro seven times (we might suspect that the frequency of the latter was more about seeing family than about fulfilling a missionary imperative). The 1821 missionary report concluded by noting that for the coming year, Green would be devoting one-quarter of his labor in “congregations convenient to the one with which he is more particularly engaged.”<sup>7</sup>

I share these details because I want us to appreciate how widely-scattered and sporadic these early missionary activities were. I count fifteen different locations where Wright conducted services, and most of them he only visited once or twice.

So, what was William Mercer Green up to? In 1822, the Missionary Society reported: “The Rev. Mr. Green, agreeably to the request expressed by the Society . . . has besides his regular ministration at Williamsborough, his place of residence, officiated once a month at Warrenton, Halifax, Oxford, and Raleigh and has met with encouragement.” That sounds slightly more manageable, certainly more regular, and somewhat promising. Note: this doesn't mean Green spent one Sunday a month in all these places; Green's visits involved going from place to place on a monthly circuit, spending a day or two in one vicinity and then moving on. This indeed was also the pattern for Episcopal visitations throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sometimes the bishop came on a Sunday, but more often it was a weekday. Presumably, that's what Green was doing on his monthly rounds. Immediately following this 1822 convention, Green and Thomas Wright were made priests by Bishop Moore, the service taking place in their hometown of Wilmington.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *NCDJ* 5<sup>th</sup> (1821): 15,16. Wright would soon settle in Wadesboro, becoming rector of the newly-formed Calvary parish there and subsequently concentrate his missionary work in the western part of the Piedmont—Anson and Rowan Counties--before relocating to Tennessee. Wright died there in a cholera epidemic in 1835.

<sup>8</sup> *NCDJ*, 6<sup>th</sup> (1822): 16, 27.

By 1823, Green was now listed as Rector of St. John's, Williamsboro in the Journal of Convention. That year, he also presented the certificate of organization for St. Stephen's, Oxford. In making his report to the missionary society, Green listed Williamsboro and Warrenton as his parochial charge, and he stated that he had given one third of his time to missionary labors, chiefly in Oxford and Raleigh, with occasional visits to Halifax, Milton, and St. Mary's, Orange County.<sup>9</sup>

The 1823 convention is most notable because it was then the diocese elected its first resident bishop, John Stark Ravenscroft. Green and Ravenscroft already enjoyed a close collegial relationship, since Ravenscroft's parish was just on the other side of the state line from Williamsboro. Indeed, it was Green who placed Ravenscroft's name in nomination for bishop and who was deputized to bring Ravenscroft the news of his election.

Ravenscroft was consecrated at the General Convention that May and then returned with Green to commence his first Episcopal visitation to his new diocese. They followed the path of Green's missionary activities: Oxford on the first of July, then Orange County, and finally Raleigh, where Ravenscroft was to make his home and serve as rector of Christ Church, along with his duties as bishop.

For the first year of Ravenscroft's episcopacy, it appears that Green kept close to his customary pattern. Of course, he no longer had to include Raleigh in his missionary circuit, but he continued to minister in Williamsboro, Warrenton, Orange County and Milton. Indeed, he presented the certificate of organization for St. Paul's, Milton at the 1824 convention.<sup>10</sup> A few months later, Green oversaw the organization of St. Matthew's.

1825 brought Green's relocation to Hillsborough. He resigned as Rector of St. John's, Williamsboro and accepted a call to serve here at St. Matthew's. In his final parochial report from Williamsboro to the 1825

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<sup>9</sup> *NCDJ* 7<sup>th</sup> (1823): 3, 6, 11, 18.

<sup>10</sup> *NCDJ* 8<sup>th</sup> (1824): 22; 24.

diocesan convention, Green listed services in Milton, St. Mary's Orange County, Hillsborough, Warrenton, and Northampton.<sup>11</sup>

The relocation to Hillsborough altered, but did not end, Green's extra-parochial activities. After 1825, Green continued to provide regular ministrations at three of the places he had already been serving.

One, of course, was St. Mary's Chapel, where close friend and college companion Walker Anderson was the lay reader.<sup>12</sup> St. Mary's had been the principal church for Orange County Episcopalians until St. Matthew's was built. Many of those who had been worshipping at St. Mary's, including members of the Cameron and Ruffin families, now became part of St. Matthew's. Although regular services at St. Mary's continued after the building of St. Matthew's, the congregation would not prosper as before. In his parochial report for 1826, William Mercer Green offered the following account of St. Mary's decline:

The congregation has, for the past year, appeared to be stationary, if not on the decline. This, I believe, has been caused in great part by the death of several of the oldest, most influential and long tried members of the congregation. Those who had clung to the cause of the Church in that quarter, during the long season of its depression, and who were the first to shed tears of joy over the prospect of her revival, have gradually been taken away, and the children having been brought up in ignorance of the Church and of the sanctifying efficacy of its ordinances, are, for the most part, indifferent to her interests, and many of them have strayed into strange pastures.

Green did, however, hasten to add that the St. Mary's Sunday School "exerts a cheering influence upon my labours in that neighborhood."<sup>13</sup>

Another of Green's ongoing responsibilities was to minister at Fairtosh, the home of Duncan Cameron in what is now northern Durham County. Green had included occasional visits to Fairtosh as part of his mission

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<sup>11</sup> *NCDJ* 9<sup>th</sup> (1825): 7, 11, 14, 15.

<sup>12</sup> On Anderson's appointment as lay reader, see the Standing Committee Report for 1823. *NCDJ* 7<sup>th</sup> (1823): 14.

<sup>13</sup> Green's comments would seem to be directed toward the Latta family (and perhaps the Holdens), who suffered the death of elderly members in 1824-25. *NCDJ* 10<sup>th</sup> (1826): 21.

work while he was still in Williamsboro, but now this became an integral, ongoing part of Green's ministry.

For over 20 years, from 1826 to 1846, Green travelled monthly the fourteen miles from Hillsborough to Fairtosh, holding services in the chapel which Cameron had built on his property and which Bishop Ravenscroft consecrated as Salem Chapel. In addition to ministering to Cameron's own family, Green was expected to minister to Cameron's neighborhood and particularly to Cameron's own enslaved population. Green reported to the diocese in 1827 that "At Judge Cameron's, the baptisms have been 26 children, one only of which was white. . . . The congregation here consists, for the most part, of coloured people."<sup>14</sup>

Ravenscroft corroborated Green's account in his diocesan record:

At Salem Chapel, the services are supplied once a month, by the Rev. Mr. Green, to a small congregation, consisting chiefly of Mr. Cameron's own family; to the coloured portion of which, which is very numerous, he is laudably desirous to impart the knowledge and influence of divine truth, and for that purpose, he gives them the privilege of receiving instruction from the Rev. Mr. Green, adapted to their capacity, on the Saturday previous to the regular day of his attendance for public worship.

During the visitation I have baptized one adult, administered the Lord's Supper to 68 communicants, consecrated one place of public worship, and examined the children of Mr. Cameron's family, on a portion of Scripture given them as an exercise by their Teacher, on which they acquitted themselves much to my satisfaction."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *NCDJ 11th* (1827): 23.

<sup>15</sup> *NCDJ 12th* (1828): 10. Ravenscroft does not say specifically whether his examination of Cameron's family was directed at white or black children—or both. The immediate context suggests the enslaved population. Green reported in the same *Journal* that he was spending the 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturdays and Sundays of each month at Salem Chapel. *NCDJ 12th* (1828): 21.

Fairtosh, then, can be added, along with St. Mary's and St. Matthew's, as the principal places where Green's ministry was centered after his relocation to Hillsborough.

But what of the places where he had previously ministered as a missionary? At both Milton and at Oxford, where Green had organized congregations and brought them into union with convention, Bishop Ravenscroft was not encouraging. After visiting Milton in August of 1824, the bishop offered a stark appraisal: "Prospects here are not very flattering. They are unable to maintain a pastor and being remote from any resident Clergyman, they rarely enjoy the benefit of our services. What advantages of this kind they do enjoy, are supplied by the active exertions of the Rev. Mr. Green."<sup>16</sup>

Green himself was not so ready to call it quits. He reported baptizing ten children and ministering to eight communicants on four or five Sundays during the past year. He wrote in his 1825 convention report: "In Milton there is still room to hope a regular congregation of zealous worshippers may yet be raised up. They need nothing but more frequent ministrations of the Church to confirm their attachment and to increase their numbers."<sup>17</sup>

Even though Green was now in Hillsborough, he continued to visit Milton on fifth Sundays, and in his 1826 report, he underscored the loyalty of the congregation, writing: "I visited Milton a few weeks past. The few friends of the Church in that place are unshaken in their attachment to her, and could any neighboring congregation unite with them, they would cheerfully and liberally contribute to the support of a missionary or settled pastor."<sup>18</sup>

By 1828, Bishop Ravenscroft had softened in his appraisal of the Milton congregation. He still lamented the fact that Milton wasn't near enough to partner with another congregation and wasn't in a position to support a minister itself, but he noted that the small band of Episcopalians

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<sup>16</sup> *NCDJ* 9<sup>th</sup> (1825): 7.

<sup>17</sup> *NCDJ* 9<sup>th</sup> (1825): 14.

<sup>18</sup> *NCDJ* 10<sup>th</sup> (1826): 22.



remained steadfastly attached to the Church and held the bishop personally in such “affectionate regard” that he, in turn, regarded the “little flock” with “much solicitude.”<sup>19</sup>

Ravenscroft carried this affection and appreciation for the loyal band of Milton Episcopalians up until his death in 1830. That, alas, was also the year when Green was prevented from visiting Milton by family affliction and personal health issues, just at a time when a critical number of congregation members moved away.<sup>20</sup> After 1831, mention of Milton in diocesan journals ceased altogether for twelve years.

As for Oxford, it was the first stop on Ravenscroft’s initial visit to his diocese upon becoming bishop. A year later, on September 1, 1824, the bishop again stopped in Oxford to preach, but this time noted: “The Church here may be considered as extinct, the only male member having acted in such a manner as to come under censure.” Ravenscroft was back two weeks later; again he preached, noting that there was “considerable excitement by some Methodists.” He added: “I consider the prospects in favor the Church very unpromising, though not hopeless.” In this instance, Green must have concurred. Beginning in 1825, he made no mention of ministering in Oxford.<sup>21</sup>

How, then, should we assess Green’s missionary efforts? Between 1819 and 1824, he organized congregations admitted into union with convention at Williamsboro, Oxford, Milton, and Hillsborough. He also served in Warrenton and Raleigh and at St. Mary’s, Orange County, where congregations were already established but where there were no resident clergy.

The results were mixed. In two of those places, Oxford and Milton, his early efforts at organization were, perhaps, premature; the congregations withered within a few years and would not be revived for some time. The sustained life of St. Stephen’s, Oxford properly dates to 1832.

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<sup>19</sup> *NCDJ* 12<sup>th</sup> (1828): 13.

<sup>20</sup> *NCDJ* 15<sup>th</sup> (1831): 7.

<sup>21</sup> *NCDJ* 9<sup>th</sup> (1825): 7, 11, 14, 15.

Why? What failed to catch hold? One contributing factor was the minimal requirements of the 1821 diocesan canon on the organization of congregations. That canon required only ten adults interested in the church and the naming of a four-member vestry before entering into union with convention.<sup>22</sup> Thus, it was fairly easy for a congregation to gain admission; but a congregation so admitted would be quite small, possibly very fragile.

Perhaps the parable of the sower applies: in the early years of the diocese, the seed was being scattered widely and some of the growth was shallow and did not take deep enough root. And it wasn't just in Milton and Oxford where congregations were started but not sustained: in Tarboro, Lexington, and at St. Jude's in Orange County, we find congregations that were organized, entered into union with Convention, and then quickly disappeared.

Another contributing factor after 1823 was Bishop Ravenscroft's insistence upon strict loyalty and conformity to the Church. Ravenscroft wanted church members to embrace what were called the "distinctive principles" of the Episcopal Church, the teachings and practices that set Episcopalians apart. Remember his comment about finding lots of Methodists but few Episcopalians in Oxford? The bishop's high church posture, his emphasis on drawing a bright line of contrast between our church and others, might have worked to the detriment of building the church in a community where Methodists already held sway.

Clearly, Green's greatest success was here in Hillsborough. St. Matthew's benefitted from the years of cultivation that preceded the formal organization in August 1824: the five years of worshipping at St. Mary's Chapel and the three years during which Green served here as missionary. St. Matthew's started with a core membership of thirty-one persons, a far greater number than the required canonical minimum.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Canon 7, *NCDJ* 7<sup>th</sup> (1823): 29.

<sup>23</sup> For a list of those who subscribed to organizing St. Matthew's, see Joseph Blount Cheshire, D.D., *An Historical Address Delivered in St. Matthew's Church, Hillsboro, N.C. On Sunday, August 24, 1924, Being the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Parish*, (Durham: Christian & King Printing Company, 1925), 21f.

Moreover, it was clearly a congregation that received Bishop Ravenscroft's enthusiastic endorsement. On his very first visit to Hillsborough in July 1823, Ravenscroft found occasion to visit Judge William Norwood and his wife, Robina Hogg Norwood, and expound to them the "distinct and authorized nature of the [Episcopal] ministry." He also noted in his private journal his unhappiness at seeing what he considered Presbyterian appropriation of places formerly belonging to our church.<sup>24</sup> Shortly after the formal organization, Ravenscroft had occasion to visit Hillsborough and meet with members of the new congregation. This time he noted in his private journal: "Find the Church organized in the village with good prospects. Fund-raising to build a Church. The Presbyterians much offended."<sup>25</sup>

The unhappiness of the local Presbyterians only increased when Ravenscroft, in December 1824, preached his public sermon attacking the North Carolina Bible Society for promoting the distribution of Bibles without providing for authorized interpreters. Among those who published rebuttals of Ravenscroft's position were two Orange County Presbyterian ministers: Professor Elisha Mitchell at the University of North Carolina and the Rev. John Knox Witherspoon, Pastor of Hillsborough Presbyterian Church. The fact that St. Matthew's was built in 1825, at the height of the Bible Society controversy, suggests that Green and others wanted to ensure that the Episcopal Church building was at least the equal of the Presbyterian Church, which meant constructing a substantial brick building, employing an early form of Gothic Revival architecture: a structure which we happily still occupy.

In three important ways, however, Green's ministry at St. Matthew's was very much a continuation and extension of his earlier ministry. In his 1823 parochial report, Green noted that when he came to Williamsboro, he had found the colonial-era church building "a perfect ruin," but by April of 1823, the building had "been thoroughly repaired," adding these words of explanation: "I feel myself in duty bound to state

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<sup>24</sup> John Stark Ravenscroft, Episcopal Journal entries for July 8 and 9, 1823. Ravenscroft Papers, 1818-1830. Microfilm in Wilson Library, Chapel Hill.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Entry for September 11, 1824.

that this has been owing principally to the active exertions of a few ladies of the congregation.”<sup>26</sup>

Green likewise encouraged an active role for the women of the parish here in Hillsborough. After one year at St. Matthew’s, Green noted in his parish parochial report, “The ladies of the congregation have formed a society, the object of which is, by the profits of their labour, to afford pecuniary aid to the Church, which has already reaped the benefits of their labours.”<sup>27</sup>

The same thing applies to the practice of slave evangelization. In 1823, Green reported: “At Williamsboro’ I have generally devoted the afternoon of Sundays to the instruction of the blacks.” When Ravenscroft came to St. Mary’s Chapel for the first time later that same year, the bishop was impressed with the efforts at improving Black literacy which he witnessed, stating “[I] was struck with the spectacle of a number of the Blacks collected together with their Boards of the alphabet in their hands-mem[o]: to carry out the thought of a plan for the profitable instruction of the Blacks in this way.”<sup>28</sup>

Ravenscroft does not say whether this instruction was being carried out by Green or by the lay reader, Walker Anderson. In any event, it speaks to Green’s efforts at evangelizing and educating the enslaved, and it reminds us that before 1830, it was still possible to encourage literacy among the Black population. Green, of course, would continue to promote slave evangelization, both at St. Matthew’s and at Fairntosh, later incorporating it into his plans for the Chapel of the Cross, but it was a practice he brought with him to Hillsborough from his earlier ministry.

At Hillsborough, Green supplemented his ministry by opening a school for young women. Here again, this had its genesis in a prior connection, this time to Warrenton, which Green served concurrently with Williamsboro. The Warrenton Female Academy is best known as the school established by the Mordecai family. But in 1825, the school

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<sup>26</sup> *NCDJ* 7<sup>th</sup> (1823): 11.

<sup>27</sup> *NCDJ* 10<sup>th</sup> (1826): 22.

<sup>28</sup> *NCDJ* 7<sup>th</sup> (1823): 11; Ravenscroft, Episcopal Journal entry for July 6, 1823. Ravenscroft Papers, 1818-1830.

passed to the Brainerd family, and the Rev. C. C. Brainerd became rector of Emmanuel, Warrenton. Green then recruited one of the Brainerd family members, Lavinia, to direct his own Female Seminary here in Hillsborough.<sup>29</sup>

Green would serve as rector of St. Matthew's for thirteen years; he would leave here to take a faculty position at Chapel Hill, where he also built the Chapel of the Cross; from there he would become the first Bishop of Mississippi in 1849 [serving until his death in 1887]. But if we wish to understand who Green was, and how he regarded the Church, its mission, and its ministry, we must begin with that formative period, when he was a young man in his early twenties, serving in Williamsboro and extending his ministry from there—to Hillsborough—and beyond.

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<sup>29</sup> Charles L. Coon, *North Carolina Schools and Academies, 1790-1840: A Documentary History*, (Raleigh: State Printing Office, 1925). On the Warrenton Female Academy under the Brainerd family (1825-1827), see pages 620-626. On the Hillsborough Female Seminary (1825-1840), see pages 300-310. The evidence suggests that Lavinia Brainerd was the first director of Green's school, beginning August, 1825; she returned to Warrenton in December, 1825, where she was listed as "the recent Directress of the Hillsborough Academy:" 621. Her place in Hillsborough was taken by Maria L. Spear. Coon commends the excellence of Green's school in Hillsborough in his introduction: xxv.