

Ambroli Church

1832

Mumbai Legacy Project
D Ward



Within the historic mill town of Girgaum is an enduring Victorian Gothic-style church that has aged over a century. Founded by Dr John Wilson, the indigenous Ambroli Church derives its name from Ambroli House, the original chapel on Dr Wilson Street. This church, built in 1832 when only horse-drawn carts cruised the streets of Bombay, preserves the rich history of the diverse neighbourhood (Thomas 2019; Samuel 1937, 40). The Ambroli Church, crafted from grey stone, appears amiss amid towering high-rise apartments surrounding it. Situated a mile away from Chowpatty and Marine Drive, it maintains an earnest presence in the bustling city (Basu, 2021, 21).

Reverend Dr. John Wilson and his wife Margaret played pivotal roles in establishing Ambroli Church in Bombay in 1831. The inaugural members of the church represented a diverse group, showcasing the inclusive spirit of Ambroli Church. Among the first members were the Scottish missionary couple John and Margaret Wilson, three Brahman men from the Konkan, a Wani merchant, a Vaishya journalist, a Maharashtrian woman from Bombay, an African sailor, and an Indo-Portuguese man from the Konkan who was a former Roman Catholic priest (Wilson, 1851, 154). The initial pastors of the church were John Wilson, Dhanjibhai Nauroji and Madhavrao B. Nikambe. In 1857, Dhanjibhai Nauroji was extended an invitation to serve as a minister at the church. He had previously converted to Christianity in 1839 and was baptised by John Wilson. Over nearly four decades, he dedicated his efforts to various communities in the city, particularly the Parsis. Two of his published sermons vividly illustrate his unwavering commitment to advancing the Gospel throughout India (Namdaran 2003, 72).



Margaret Wilson had previously founded a girls' school in 1829, initially for Marathi education. This school later evolved into St. Columba's High School, a distinguished institution for girls in modern Mumbai (Anderson, 1999, 742). Her dedicated efforts played a pivotal role in establishing a foundation for the endeavours of Scottish missionaries. When she arrived in Bombay, she made it her mission to champion women's education as a formidable challenge. She expressed, "... We have now come to Bombay, the place destined to be the scene of our future labour and trials." Taking the initiative, she founded six-day schools for girls and actively monitored their growth and development. Margaret Wilson went the extra mile by learning the local dialect, Marathi, and conducted her teachings in this language. Her sincere labour and commitment left a lasting impact on education, marking a significant chapter in the mission of Scottish missionaries in Bombay (Srivastava, 41, 2000).

In 1832, the couple initiated the Ambroli English School, and by 1836, a college wing was added, named the Free General Assembly's Institution, aligning with similar colleges in other Presidencies. After undergoing several name changes, it eventually became known as Wilson College, retaining that name to this day. The college building, now a significant landmark in Mumbai, with its mid-Victorian architectural style, was designed by John Adams, a notable architect whose contributions dot the city's landscape (Raychaudhuri, 2021, 38).



There are various assumptions on the derivation of the name 'Ambroli', based on which the church was named. Members of the congregation hold the belief that the name Ambroli Church was derived from a place in Gujarat, from where people migrated to Mumbai. Interestingly, twenty families from this region have found their home in the Ambroli Apartment, an extension of the church building. This connection to the church's name and its ties to a specific place in Gujarat reflect the diverse and interconnected nature of the congregation (Thomas, 2019). Rao Bahadur P. B. Joshi, in Sheppard's book, writes that "the name is a corruption from the old name of the locality. It appears to be derived from umbar, a fig tree (*ficus glomerata*) and ali, a lane. So the original name appears to have been Umbarali or Umbrali. There are other instances of the name. For example, the village near Sopara in the Bassein taluka of the Thana district is called Umbrali. Ambra is Sanskrit for the mango, and native Christians may have changed Umbrali into Ambrali or Ambroi" (Sheppard, 1917, 19).

There were two institutions affiliated with the church, namely Ambroli School, which evolved into the Wilson High English School, also founded in 1932 by Wilson, which later evolved into Wilson High School. The other was Wilson College (Gandhi, 2010, 111). John Wilson was the Principal at Wilson High School and College until his passing in Bombay. He introduced Western education, authored textbooks, and administered examinations. In 1857, he played a pivotal role in the founding of Bombay University and later assumed the role of its Vice-Chancellor in 1869. A trailblazer in promoting education for individuals from lower castes, John Wilson served as a government adviser on educational policies. Proficient in numerous languages, including Sanskrit, Gujarati, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Urdu, Hindustani, Persian, Arabic, and Zend (the language of the Zoroastrian scriptures), he emerged as a distinguished speaker. He also presided over the Asiatic Society of Bombay from 1835 to 1842 (Anderson, 1999, 742). He held regular meetings at the Ambroli Church when he was a pastor and spoke about faith to people from different social and cultural backgrounds.

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