

# The Trial of Rhoda Bement: A Microcosm of Temperance, Abolitionism and Woman's Rights Activism in Seneca Falls, NY

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In the 1840s at least three reform movements—abolition (anti-slavery), temperance, and women's rights—were evolving in Seneca Falls. The 1843-44 trial of Rhoda Bement by the Session of the Presbyterian Church in Seneca Falls clearly shows how these issues of temperance, abolition and woman's rights were festering and interacting in Seneca Falls before the 1848 Seneca Falls convention. (Picture at right is that of Rhoda Bement; provided courtesy of relatives of Rhoda Bement)



There were tensions between the radical abolitionists and those who were more sympathetic to slavery. On the national political scene, the Democratic Party had been avoiding taking a strong stand on the slavery issue in an attempt to keep the party from being split north and south. Various churches, including the Methodist and Presbyterian denominations, had not taken a definitive position on the slavery issue in the hopes of keeping all church members—nationwide-united.

In August 1842, Abby Kelley gave several public "lectures" in Seneca Falls. This was part of her extensive travels throughout upstate New York as an agent for the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society. She denounced even northern churches if they were not anti-slavery. Even taking a neutral position on slavery—neither publicly for nor against it—was unacceptable to her. She repeatedly denounced "colonizationists" (those who favored freeing slaves and sending them back to Africa). Because the Rev. Horace P. Bogue, acting pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Seneca Falls, had been an agent for the American Colonization Society, Abby Kelley had no real respect for him. Similarly, it should not be surprising that Rev. Bogue would be less than sympathetic to abolitionists in his own congregation, fearing that their extreme position on slavery would lead to division within the congregation. Immediately after Abby Kelley's lectures in Seneca Falls in 1842, Rev. Bogue had the Presbyterian Church conduct inquiries about any Presbyterians who had attended her lectures. Ansel Bascom reported that those conducting these perfunctory inquiries were "satisfied with any kind of apology...and put no body upon trial."<sup>1</sup>

No Seneca Falls church would allow Abby Kelly the use of its facilities when she returned for another speaking engagement in August 1843. So, she spoke in the apple orchard of Ansel and Eliza Bascom, which was a site that community residents had become accustomed to going to for such events and celebrations on July 4<sup>th</sup>. Specifically, Abby Kelly had this to say: "This nation is guilty of slavery. It is a sin. Your churches are connected with slavery, and they are guilty of that sin. They are not Christians if they are slaveholders, if they steal and sell men, women and children, if they rob cradles. Northern churches were as guilty, in fact, as southern slaveholders, since northerners had the majority population and could make things right. That includes your Presbyterian Church," she went on. "I happen to know something of your Mr. Bogue, the pastor of that church. Where is your Bogue today? Is he not connected with the



South? Is he not in full fellowship with proslavery churchmen? These proslavery persecutions today follow the same spirit of persecution that existed in former ages. Mr. Bogue would see me burn at the stake, if he had it in his power, or murdered as abolitionists had been at the south.”<sup>2</sup> It is important to understand that she was making these comments on a Sabbath afternoon—at a time when the Presbyterian Church was holding its second service. For Rhoda Bement and other church parishioners to hear Abby Kelley speak, they had to, in effect, “skip” attending their own church’s afternoon service.

Kelley’s “lectures” in 1842 and 1843 motivated Rhoda Bement and other Seneca Falls residents to become abolitionist activists—an extreme position that was referred to at the time as “ultraism.” Rhoda Bement had been a Baptist but became a member of the Presbyterian Church in Seneca Falls in 1839.<sup>3</sup> Many anti-slavery fairs were held in Seneca Falls to raise funds to help “freedom seekers” Elizabeth M’Clintock of Waterloo and Rhoda Bement organized an anti-slavery fair that was held at the Temperance Hall in Seneca Falls on October 4-5, 1843. They advertised “a most beautiful variety of useful and fancy articles, many of which have been contributed from Rochester, Syracuse, Utica, Albany, Boston and many other places.” Admittance was half a shilling (about 6 and ¼ cents). In the evening, speeches, vocal music and a concert by the Geneva Band afforded a rare “feast of reason and flow of soul.” Significantly, this was the first recorded example of Seneca Falls and Waterloo women working together.<sup>4</sup> (Picture at left is a view of the Seneca Falls Presbyterian Church building at the time of the trial)



According to Rhoda Bement, tensions between the Rev. Horace

P. Bogue, acting pastor of the Presbyterian Church and herself came into the open in the vestibule of the church on the first Sunday in October 1843. Following the conclusion of the morning worship service, she confronted Rev. Bogue privately with a grievance. She said that he had ignored antislavery notices that she had laid on his desk that morning (Sunday, October 1, 1843 and the previous Sunday, September 24, too). (Shown at right is the newspaper notice for the anti-slavery fair that Rhoda Bement wanted Rev. Bogue to announce from the pulpit.) What began as a conversation ended in a shouting match that was overhead by many. Bement claimed that Rev. Bogue denied that he had seen any notices. Each made accusations against the other. Rev. Bogue accused Bement of being “very unchristian, very impolite and very much out of your place to pounce upon me in this manner.” Bement said she had a right to ask Rev. Bogue why he hadn’t read the notices, especially when he claimed that he was an abolitionist. She is believed to have said to

#### ANTI-SLAVERY FAIR

Will be open at the Temperance Hall, in Seneca Falls, Wednesday and Thursday, Oct. 4th and 5th, at 2 o’clock P. M. and continue open through the evenings.

A most beautiful variety of useful and fancy articles, many of which have been contributed from Rochester, Syracuse, Utica, Albany, Boston, and many other places, will give the inhabitants of this vicinity an opportunity to supply themselves, while at the same time they aid the cause of the perishing slave. Admittance 12½ cts.

#### THE SOREE

On Thursday evening. Hall open at 6½ o’clock. Collation at 7, after which, speeches from many advocates of liberty, music from the Geneva Band, and vocal music for freedom, shall afford a rare “feast of reason and flow of soul.” Ticket 25 cts.

“Come, and help the cause along.”  
In behalf of the Fair,

RHODA BEMENT,  
E. W. M’CLINTOCK.

*Seneca Observer*, October 4, 1843  
Courtesy Waterloo Historical Society

him, "You told me you was an abolitionist & I supposed if you was you would read abolition notices."

Following the second worship service on Oct. 1<sup>st</sup>, Rev. Bogue met with the church elders who decided to put Rhoda Bement on trial before the Church Session. Other charges against Bement suddenly surfaced. One new charge alleged that not only had she acted in an unchristian manner toward Rev. Bogue in the vestibule, she had also refused to attend communion and other meetings when Rev. Bogue officiated. Another new charge was that she had "in a conspicuous manner" attended the "exhibition made by Abby Kelley on the first Sabbath of Aug. last...while the church to which Mrs. Bement belongs were attending upon divine service."<sup>5</sup> Specifically, the Session on December 18, 1843 adopted this charge with five specifications:

**Mrs. Rhoda Bement is charged with disorderly & unchristian conduct.**

- First in dividing the Lord's Supper, partaking the bread & refusing the cup.
- Second in attending in a conspicuous manner upon the exhibitions made by Abby Kelley on the first Sabbath of Aug. last between the hours of five and eight o'clock P.M. & while the church to which Mrs. Bement belongs were attending upon divine service.
- Third in her behavior towards the Pastor of this church in the vestibule of the church on the first Sabbath of October last in the presence of various members of the congregation.
- Fourth in absenting herself from the communion on said first Sabbath of October.
- Fifth in having absented herself from public worship since that time whenever the acting Pastor of said church has officiated.<sup>6</sup>

On that same date, the Rev. Samuel H. Gridley, pastor of the Waterloo Presbyterian Church, assumed the role of Moderator for all future trial Sessions. Rev. Gridley denied Rhoda Bement's request that her husband, Jeremy, be her counsel.<sup>1</sup> Daniel W. Forman served initially as her counsel.<sup>2</sup> On January 23, 1844, Mr. Forman withdrew as Rhoda Bement's counsel because of ill health. He was replaced by Dr. Joseph Kerr Brown.<sup>3</sup> (Picture at left is that of the Rev. Samuel H. Gridley)



Bement's Session trial lasted two full months. The church elders were H. McAlister, A.S. Platt, D. W. Forman, C. Hood, M. C. Deming and J. K. Brown.<sup>7</sup> Dozens of witnesses testified. Manuscript minutes of the proceedings filled 60 pages in the church record book. Judith Wellman in her book commented, "Seneca Falls riveted its attention on temperance, abolitionism and woman's rights. Some of the testimony must have made Bogue's supporters regret that they had ever raised these issues."

<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Bement had been in a carriage-making business with partner Abraham Buckout. This business suffered greatly from the Panic of 1837. He joined the Presbyterian Church in 1839. Although he was characterized as conducting questionable business practices, he served on the village Board of Trustees in 1837 and again in 1846.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel W. Forman was a lawyer and businessman. He had joined the Presbyterian Church in 1830 and became a ruling elder in 1832. He was the secretary of the Seneca County Anti-Slavery Society in 1839.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Joseph Kerr Brown was a physician and druggist. He had joined the Presbyterian Church in 1835 and was chosen a ruling elder in 1838. He was a village trustee in 1842 and 1843. He became president of the board in 1847. In 1849, he left Seneca Falls for Lockport, NY.

Regarding her refusal to take wine at communion, Bement argued in her defense that it was not pure “juice of the grape”—that it seemed contaminated by “alcohol or some kind of drug.” She argued that it was too strong for a person with temperance principles. Others testified in her defense. Delia Matthews testified that “the last time I partook of the wine it was very offensive; it was very strong alcoholic wine. I have been absent the last two communions and at the two previous communions I refused to partake of it.” Joseph Metcalf, the key organizer of the Wesleyan Church in Seneca Falls, testified that Methodists saw no need to serve wine as their communion drink—for the past year they had used unfermented grape juice, boiled and diluted.<sup>8</sup>

Most of the trial focused on Kelley’s abolitionism. Bement strongly defended Kelley’s comments as being truly Christian. Opponents viewed Kelley’s actions differently. They were particularly upset that Kelley had been urging people to sign a “Tea Total Pledge” that summarized the radical abolitionist position. Signers of the pledge asserted that they agreed that slavery was a “heinous sin and crime, a curse to the master and a grievous wrong to the slave.” Another part of the pledge statement included, “We will never vote for any candidate for civil office, nor countenance any man as a Christian minister, nor hold connexion [sic] with any organization as a christian [sic] church” unless political parties and churches refused to support “any provision of the Constitution of the United States in favor of slavery.” Signers publicly pledged themselves to “immediate and unconditional emancipation.” Signers disavowed all fellowship with those who claimed slaves (ownership of slaves) or with those who voted for “slave claimants or their abettors.” Signers of the pledge agreed not to support those who might attempt to down forcible slave resistance.

The trial testimony about the pledge made many of Bogue’s supporters squirm. When Fanny Sackett was asked why she did not sign the pledge, she confessed that “I thought I would be bound to withdraw from the church & did not like to do so.” Ansel Bascom, said that he felt Kelley’s speeches led him to believe that if a person signed the pledge that person would have to “come out” of all pro-slavery churches. He said that he considered the Presbyterian Church to be a pro-slavery church. Cornelia Perry testified that Abby Kelley’s August 1842 talks had been the first abolitionist discussion she had ever heard. Perry said, “Our ministers had never told us anything about it & I had supposed there was no very great sin in it.”<sup>9</sup>

Woman’s rights also were at issue in this trial. “In her challenge to male religious authority, Bement provided a power role model.” The trial authorities asked Jabez Matthews whether he considered it proper and “clearly established in the Bible,” “for a female to call a promiscuous meeting<sup>4</sup> for the purpose of addressing them on Moral & Religious subjects?” even when it was “contrary to the established sentiment of the church to which they belong.” Matthews replied, I believe it is.”<sup>10</sup>

On January 23, 1844, the elders of the church Session found Bement guilty of “disorderly and unchristian conduct.” The vote of each of the five “specifications” was unanimous except that Mr. Forman voted no on the third specification.<sup>11</sup> A committee consisting of Rev. Gridley, M.B. Bellows and M.C. Deming was appointed to visit Mrs. Bement to see if she would now see “the error of her ways.”<sup>12</sup>

The committee reported to the Session on January 30, 1844 that they had been unable to convince Mrs. Bement. Mrs. Bement then appeared at the Session and made this statement: “I have but one thing to say. For if I be an offender or have committed any thing worthy of death I refuse not to die; but if there be none of these things whereof they accuse me, no man may

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<sup>4</sup> “Promiscuous” at this time meant any common public association/gathering of both females and males.

deliver me unto them—I appeal not unto Caesar but until God.” She left and then D.W. Forman presented some kind of written dissent and protest as to what the Session was likely to do next. The contents of this written document no longer exists. Then the Session voted that “Mrs. Bement be suspended from the Communion of this Church until she give evidence of repentance and return to duty.”<sup>13</sup>

This censure by the Session would not be lifted unless she repented. She unsuccessfully appealed the decision to the regional committee of ministers and elders that met at Waterloo a week later.

Presbyterians in Seneca Falls had sustained Rev. Bogue’s good name, but they paid a price. The Bements and other abolitionist members left the Presbyterian Church, with many joining the new Wesleyan Church. Those who joined the Wesleyan Church included elder Daniel W. Forman, Sally Freeland Pitcher and Harriet Freeland Lindsley.<sup>14</sup> When the Presbyterian Church Session learned that Mrs. Bement was attending services at the new Wesleyan Methodist Church, the Session voted to excommunicate her.<sup>15</sup> In 1849 the Bements decided to leave Seneca Falls to move to Michigan. While making this move, Jeremy Bement contracted cholera in Buffalo and died.<sup>16</sup>

The Rhoda Bement trial showed how strongly reform sentiments were evolving in Seneca Falls by fall 1843. Rhoda Bement was only one of many Seneca Falls residents that had embraced temperance sentiments by that year. It would only be five years later—in 1848—that both anti-slavery sentiments and woman’s rights desires would result in major actions in Seneca Falls. In the case of anti-slavery sentiments there were several local meetings to form a local Free Soil party to keep lands gained from the Mexican War from becoming new slave states. For the cause of woman’s rights, it would be the momentous July 1848 Seneca Falls convention. Her trial, was a clear foreboding of these events.

The story does not end here, however. On February 22, 2013, Seneca County Historian Walter Gable presented a program on local Underground Railroad activity to staff at the New York State Agricultural Station in Geneva, NY. In the audience was Robert Seem, a member of the Seneca Falls Presbyterian Church. He heard Gable tell about the Rhoda Bement incident in his presentation. He brought that information back to his church and suggested that this censure be overturned. In consultation with the national church organization, the Seneca Falls Presbyterian Church officials learned that it would be permissible for a local church session to do so. Accordingly, On September 23, 2013, the local session voted to overturn the 1840s censure of Rhoda Bement. The current pastor, the Rev. Leah Ntuala, said, “I think Rhoda would be dancing with joy in heaven to learn the censure placed on her has been overturned. The church where she once worshiped is now a Covenant Network Church and has for the first time called a female pastor who is married to a black man. God does always have the last laugh.” It’s as if the Rhoda Bement trial story has come full circle over 150 years later!

According to the two authors of *Revivalism, Social Conscience and Community in the Burned-Over District: The Trial of Rhoda Bement*, the central theme of the Rhoda Bement trial is the stress that is generated by the desires for both change and stability. “Her challenge to the authority of the male leadership of her church confronted Seneca Falls’s Presbyterians with the threat of disunity at a time when harmony was perceived as vital to preserving the influence of the church in the community. The church men and women of Seneca Falls recognized the danger of disintegration in a village already subject to considerable stress and thought of themselves as a nexus of good order. Faced with a threat to harmony, the authorities of the church drew back from activism. Choosing caution, the Reverend Horace Bogue reluctantly brought his parishioner to trial.” It is easy to think of *current* examples of “stress that is generated by the desires for both

change and stability”—here in Seneca County, in the Middle East, etc. Hopefully, the Rhoda Bement Trial provides us with a perspective to bring to these times of stress.

[Special Note: An excellent source for more information about this trial is the book *Revivalism, Social Conscience and Community in the Burned-Over District: The Trial of Rhoda Bement* by Glenn C. Altschuler and Jan M. Saltzgaber, published by Cornell University Press in 1983. The fully annotated text of the trial is presented in its entirety. Saltzgaber in an introductory essay examines the religious and social ramifications of the Second Great Awakening in the “burned-over” region of New York, analyzing in detail the changing social and economic environment of Seneca Falls. In a concluding essay Altschuler uses the trial and evidence from other local churches to reassess the divisive effects of revivals, stressing local conditions and church practices that acted as centripetal forces that impressed conservatives, moderates, and even “ultraists” with the importance of church unity.]

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004, p. 131

<sup>2</sup> Wellman, p. 132

<sup>3</sup> Glenn C. Altschuler and Jan M. Saltzbager, *Revivalism, Social Conscience and Community in the Burned-Over District: The Trial of Rhoda Bement*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983, p 34.

<sup>4</sup> Wellman, p. 116

<sup>5</sup> Wellman, pp. 131-32

<sup>6</sup> Altschuler and Saltzbager, pp 96-97.

<sup>7</sup> Altschuler and Saltzbager, p 89.

<sup>8</sup> Wellman, p. 132

<sup>9</sup> Wellman, pp. 132-33

<sup>10</sup> Wellman, p. 133

<sup>11</sup> Altschuler and Saltzbager, p 139.

<sup>12</sup> Altschuler and Saltzbager, p 139.

<sup>13</sup> Altschuler and Saltzbager, p 140.

<sup>14</sup> Wellman, p 133

<sup>15</sup> Altschuler and Saltzbager, p 143.

<sup>16</sup> Altschuler and Saltzbager, p 20.