



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

The three reform movements—abolition, temperance, and women's rights—have each been discussed so far in a separate chapter. These three movements were evolving at the same time—festered and interacting together. The 1843 trial of Rhoda Bement by the session of the Presbyterian Church in Seneca Falls clearly shows how the issues of temperance, abolition and woman's rights were festering and interacting in Seneca Falls before the 1848 Seneca Falls convention.

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, 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. 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>

Kelley's "lectures" in 1842 and 1843 motivated Rhoda Bement and other Seneca Falls residents to become abolitionist activists. Rhoda Bement was a member of the Presbyterian Church in Seneca Falls. Many anti-slavery fairs were held in Seneca Falls to raise funds to help "freedom seekers" ("fugitive slaves") (Rhoda Bement photo, courtesy of the descendants of Rhoda Bement)

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>[2]</sup>

According to Rhoda Bement, tensions between the Rev. Horace P. Bogue, pastor of the Presbyterian Church and herself came into the open in the vestibule of the church on the first Sunday in October 1843. 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). What began as a conversation ended in a shouting match that was overhead by everyone. 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.

Rev. Bogue convinced the congregation to put Rhoda Bement on trial. 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>[3]</sup>

Bement's trial lasted two full months. 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."

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>[4]</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>[5]</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>[6]</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>[7]</sup>

On January 30, 1844, the church session found Bement guilty of “disorderly and unchristian conduct.” This censure meant that she was expelled as a church member unless she repented. Bement refused to apologize. 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. Jeremy and Rhoda Bement left Seneca Falls for Buffalo.

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 it would be 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. Rhoda Bement was no longer a Seneca Falls resident in 1848. Her trial, however, was a clear foreboding.

The story does not end here, however. When current members of the Seneca Falls Presbyterian Church recently learned about Rhoda Bement, they initiated the process of overturning her censure. In communication with the historian's office of the national church organization, they learned that there was no precedent for overturning the censure of a deceased Presbyterian church member. They also 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 1843 censure of Rhoda Bement. The current pastor, the Rev. Leah Ntuala, expressed that she felt that Rhoda Bement would be overwhelmed with joy to learn that her censure had been overturned and that the church currently has an ordained female pastor who is married to a black person. It's as if the Rhoda Bement trial story has come full circle over 150 years later!

[1] 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

[2] p. 116

[3] pp. 131-32

[4] p. 132

[5] pp. 132-33

[6] "Promiscuous" at this time meant any common public association/gathering of both females and males.

[7] p. 133