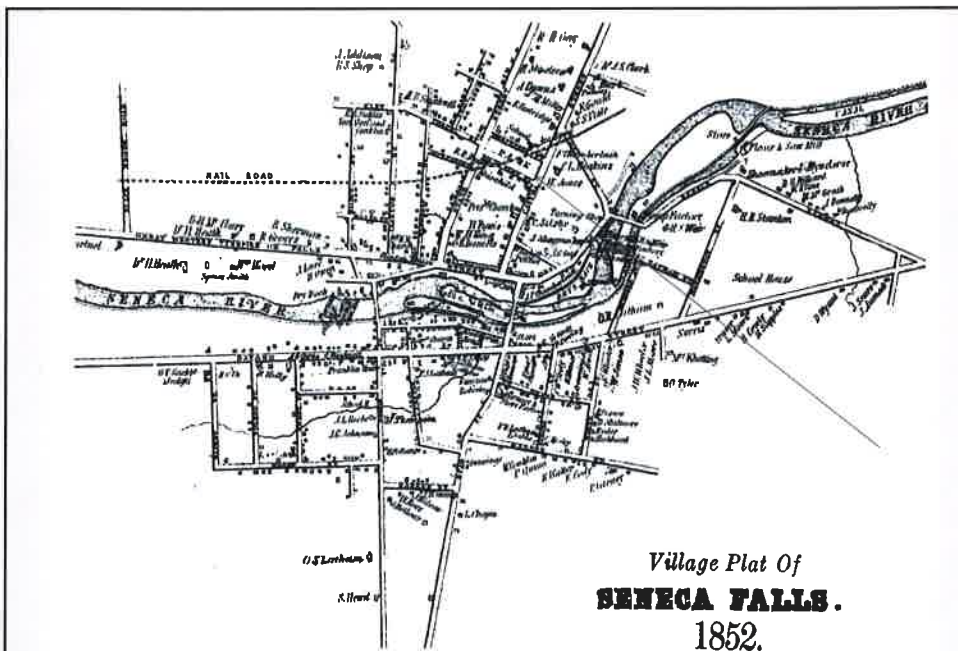


**REVIVALISM  
SOCIAL  
CONSCIENCE  
AND  
COMMUNITY  
IN THE  
BURNED-OVER  
DISTRICT**  
*The Trial of  
Rhoda Bement*

GLENN C. ALTSCHULER  
AND  
JAN M. SALTZGABER

## History Gets an Update: Seneca Falls Presbyterian Church Reverses Its Censure of Rhoda Denison Bement



**Village Plat Of  
SENECA FALLS.  
1852.**

The village of Seneca Falls in 1852. Map shows the location of the Presbyterian and other churches as well as the homes of several participants in the Bement trial. From *History of Seneca Co., New York* (Philadelphia, 1876), reprinted by W. E. Morrison and Co. (Ovid, New York, 1979).


**Second Great Awakening (1800-1840)**

↓


People experience **Religious Revival (re-birth)**

↓


**"Personal Spiritual Reform" - God saves individual from sin**



**Rev. Charles G. Finney**

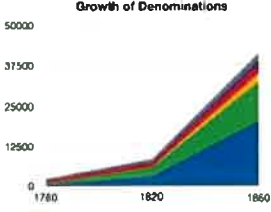


**"Burned-Over District"**



- branches of the mormon church
- revivals in 1831
- churches showing antislavery sentiment
- millentes

**Growth of Denominations**



Year	Methodist	Baptist	Catholic	Episcopal	Congregational	Lutheran
1780	~1000	~500	~200	~100	~100	~100
1820	~10000	~8000	~3000	~2000	~1500	~1000
1860	~25000	~15000	~10000	~5000	~3000	~2000

**Coming out of the Second Great Awakening were these new religious movements in the Burned-Over District:**

- **Latter Day Saint movement (Mormon Church)**--founded by Joseph Smith in Fayette in 1830
- **Millerites**--William Miller preached that the literal Second Coming would occur "October 22, 1844."
- **Fox sisters** of Hydesville conducted the first table-rapping seances in the area, leading to the American movement of **Spiritualism** (centered in the retreat at Lily Dale and in the Plymouth Spiritualist Church in Rochester, NY), which taught communion with the dead.
- **Shakers**--were very active in the area, establishing their first communal farm in central New York.
- **Oneida Society**--was a large utopian group that established a successful community in central New York; it subsequently disbanded. It was known for its unique interpretation of group marriage, which had mates chosen by committee; the children of the community were raised in common.



- **1842 -- American Anti-Slavery Society sends 20 agents to speak throughout upstate NY**

- Aug, Sept 1842 – she spoke in Seneca Falls and Waterloo
- Nov. 1842—she spoke at Seneca County Courthouse in Waterloo

- **Impact of this speaking tour**

- Western NY Anti-Slavery Society organized
- first of several anti-slavery fairs held in Rochester in Feb. 1843



*Abby Kelley*

### August 1843 speaking tour of Abby Kelley

- No SF church would let her speak in their facilities
- Spoke in the apple orchard of Ansel and Eliza Bascom
- Her message was fiery:

*"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."*

### Rev. Horace P. Bogue

- Acting Pastor of the SF Presbyterian Church
- Ardent supporter of colonization – free the slaves and then send them to Liberia in Africa
  - this colonization belief was attacked by most abolitionists as being a symptom of racial prejudice
  - 1842 the very 1<sup>st</sup> resolution of the Western NY Anti-Slavery Society attacked the American Colonization Society
- He and the Elders of the SF Presbyterian Church were trying to prevent the extreme abolitionists (the "ultraists") from breaking up the congregation.

#### 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 SOIREE

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." Tickets 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

- Rhoda Bement heard Abby Kelley speak in Seneca Falls and became an ardent supporter of abolition (an "ultraist")
- E.W. M'Clintock is the older daughter of Mary Ann and Thomas M'Clintock of Waterloo
- This is the notice of anti-slavery fair that Rhoda Bement gave the Rev. Bogue to read as an announcement from the pulpit, but on 2 different occasions (9-24 and 10-1) he did not do so.

### Sunday, Oct 1, 1843 Incident

- **Acting pastor Bogue has a busy day**
  - following 1<sup>st</sup> service (morning)--meets with church elders to finalize antislavery resolution
  - Rhoda Bement stops him in the vestibule to ask him why he has not read the announcement about the anti-slavery fair (see below) that she had put on his desk for him to read the previous Sunday as well as today
  - at second service presents antislavery resolution that is adopted unanimously by attendees
  - following 2<sup>nd</sup> service (afternoon), meets with elders to have them agree to initiate censure trial of Rhoda Bement
- **In the incident, Rhoda Bement privately confronts Rev. Horace P. Bogue in the church vestibule, as she wants to know why he didn't read the notices she gave him on 9-24 and 10-1**
  - shouting match evolves that is heard by everyone
  - he denies having seen any such notices
  - he accused Bement of being "very unchristian, very impolite and very much out of your place to pounce upon me in this manner"
  - she said she had a right to ask him why he hadn't read the notices, especially when he claimed he was an abolitionist  
"You told me you was an abolitionist & I supposed if you was you would read abolition notices."

## Charge Spelled Out at Dec. 18, 1843 Session

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

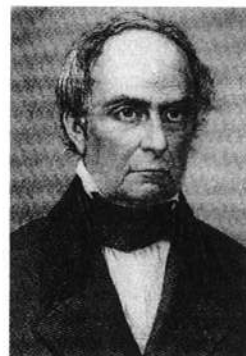
- First in dividing the Lord's Supper, partaking the bread & refusing the cup.
- Second in attending in a conspicuous manner upon the exhibitions made by Abby Kelley on the first Sabbath of Aug. last between the hours of five and eight o'clock P.M. & while the church to which Mrs. Bement belongs were 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.



S. H. GRIDLEY, D. D.

The Rev. Samuel H. Gridley, the pastor of the Waterloo Presbyterian Church, presided as Moderator in this Session trial, starting on January 12, 1844.

## Two of the key people in the Session trial



Dr. Joseph Kerr Brown, an elder of the First Presbyterian Church of Seneca Falls who was appointed Rhoda Bement's defense counsel after the resignation of her original choice. Courtesy Seneca Falls Historical Society.

Dr. Kerr became Rhoda Bement's defense attorney on January 23, 1844, after Rev. Bogue as initial Moderator wouldn't allow Mr. Bement to fulfill that role, and then when D. W. Forman was excused because of ill health.

## **Issues raised in the two-months-long trial**

- **Temperance issue**
  - RB argued communion wine seemed contaminated by “alcohol or some kind of drug”—it was too strong for a person with temperance principles
  - Joseph Metcalf (key organizer of Wesleyan church) testified that Methodists saw no need to serve wine as their communion drink

- **Abolitionist issue**
  - RB strongly defends Abby Kelley’s comments as being truly Christian
  - Others, such as Fanny Sackett and Ansel Bascom, testified that to sign the “Tea Total Pledge” that RB advocated would force them to leave the SF Presbyterian church
  - Cornelia Perry testified that her ministers had never told us anything about slavery—she learned it from Abby Kelley

- **Woman's rights issue**

- Rev. Bogue was in effect saying RB was challenging male religious authority
- Jabez Matthews was asked whether he considered it proper and "clearly established in the Bible" "for a female to call a promiscuous meeting 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."



### The Decision in the Session trial on January 30, 1844



- **Mid-Jan. 1844**
  - The church elders at the Session adopted all 5 specifications (only non-unanimous vote was D.W. Forman voting no on the third specification)
  - created a committee to meet with Mrs. Bement in the hopes of convincing her of her error.
- **Jan. 30, 1844**
  - Committee reported it met with Mrs. Bement but she refused to admit having committed any error
  - Mrs. Bement appeared and made 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 non of these things whereof these accuse me, no man may deliver me unto them—I appeal not unto Caesar but unto God."* Then she left.
  - passed a motion that Mrs. Bement be suspended from the Communion of this Church until she give evidence of repentance and return to duty.



## Aftermath of the Trial

- RB unsuccessfully appealed the decision to the regional committee of ministers and elders that met at Waterloo a week later
- RB starts attending services at the Wesleyan Methodist Church
- several abolitionist sympathizers of RB left their SF Presbyterian Church, with many joining the new Wesleyan Church (which was started as an anti-slavery church)
- When Presbyterian Church Session learned that RB is attending the Wesleyan Methodist Church, the Session excommunicated her from the Presbyterian Church.
- 1849, Rhoda and Jeremy Bement left SF for Michigan, but Jeremy died in Buffalo of cholera.



## 1843-44 is a very turbulent time for various Protestant churches in Seneca Falls

- Presbyterian Church is dealing with the Rhoda Bement incident
- Methodist Church
  - has passed some strongly-worded anti-slavery motions but can't get the church conference to accept them
  - 39 members withdrew to be the core of the newly-formed Wesleyan Methodist church
- Baptist Church dealing with Rev. E. R. Pinney's revelation that he is a Millerite
  - 80 members left to await the removal of this pastor
  - when Rev. Pinney does leave, 50 members left with him

## And now the rest of the story

- February 22, 2013 – Walt Gable presented UGRR program at Agricultural Experiment Station for Black History Month  
Bob Seem in attendance – learns about Rhoda Bement trial and takes his concerns back to SF Presbyterian Church
- September 23, 2013 – SF Presbyterian Church session rescinds the 1844 censure of Rhoda Bement
- October 12, 2013 – When Walt Gable met Francie Pepper



### HISTORY GETS AN UPDATE

SF church reverses its 1843 censure of abolitionist

Story by  
SHAR GLAZE PORTER  
porter@times.com

**ESSEX FALLS** — History is ... and changes. That's the apparent lesson if you read a notice by the Presbyterian Church in Essex Falls, which in late September voted to rescind the 1844 censure of Rhoda Bement, Essex County historian Walter Hildreth says about Bement after this year in its ongoing Black history project in the Finger Lakes Tri-States.

Most people are familiar with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her tribulations for women's rights, but as this notice "is in very subtle, however, that the Essex Falls residents are little about the Rhoda Bement trial. The 1844 trial stemmed by the session of the Presbyterian Church in Essex Falls clearly shows how the issues of temperance, abolition and women's rights in history in Essex Falls before the 1844 censure."



When, as anti-slavery activist, confronted her pastor the Rev. Hiram P. Deane, for ignoring anti-slavery lines she had laid on his desk. Their conversation deteriorated into a shouting match and Deane eventually had the church convene to putting Bement on trial not only for the altercation, but for refusing to sign and endorsing an exhibition by abolitionist for Kelley.

The two-month trial ended with Bement being found

guilty and expelled from the church. Gable said he also mentioned Bement's story at a talk he gave at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station last February. Among those in hand was Robert Seem, a pastor at the Presbyterian Church of Essex Falls. He brought the news back to his congregation.

The church's pastor the Rev. Leah Ntuala, said when Seem told the story to the church's governing body (known as the Session) "they found the history and everyone wanted to fix this history."

But how to do so was an unprecedented path. Ntuala said the contact of the Presbytery and the question was forwarded to the General Assembly level. Ntuala, who sits on a judicial committee for the local Synod, continued to seek mediation and hoped that even though Bement was deceased and could not be restored to the church's membership roll, it was possible for the local Session to rescind the censure. That was done unanimously on Sept. 23. The vote was not only the church's minutes and is now part of the local church's permanent history and the nation's democratic records, she said.

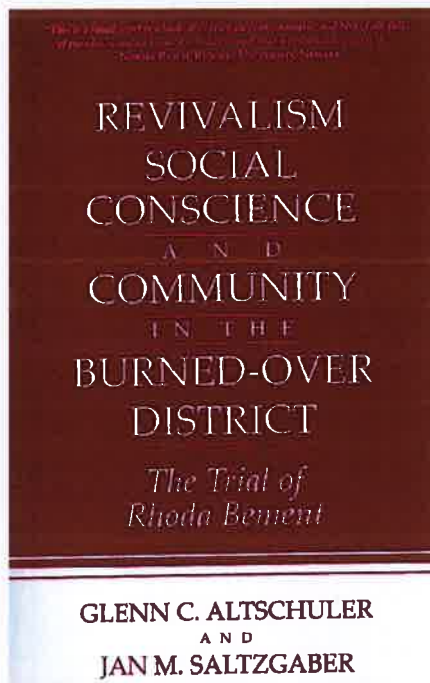
Ntuala never anticipated that part of her job as a pastor would be going through church archives from 1844 reading about Bement's censure. She also took the Cornell University Press book "Black

Finger Lakes Times  
11-10-2013

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."



**To read the  
full trial story...**



**Seneca Falls Stories, Volume 2**  
**Three Reform Causes Impacting  
Seneca Falls in the  
Mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century: Abolition,  
Temperance, & Woman's Rights**  
Articles by Walter Gable



A publication of the Seneca Falls Historical Society  
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*The Rhoda Bement Incident  
is a "microcosm" of how  
these 3 reform movements  
were festering and  
interacting in Seneca Falls  
before 1848.*

\$16— except for the sales tax, all proceeds go to the Seneca Falls Historical Society

**Does the Rhoda Bement trial have another kind of relevance to us today?**

- According to the 2 authors of *Revivalism, Social Conscience and Community in the Burned-Over District: The Trial of Rhoda Bement*, the central theme of this trial is the stress that is generated by the desires for both change and stability.
- It is easy to think of current examples of “stress that is generated by the desires for both change and stability”—locally, in the Middle East, etc.

*So, can the story of the Rhoda Bement trial provide us with a perspective to bring into how we handle these current examples?*