

Seneca County and the Burned-Over District

In the 1820s and 1830s a religious revival movement known as the Second Great Awakening swept over the United States, especially Upstate New York. Between 1825 and 1835, at least 1343 “revivals” took place in New York State, with the Rev. Charles Grandison Finney being the main preacher at many of them. In the Second Great Awakening, the three largest denominations were the Methodists, the Baptists, and the Presbyterians. Upstate New York became known as the “Burned-Over District” as a result of this Second Great Awakening. The term derived from the belief that the revivalism left no other person to be Christianized, just like a forest fire burning everything in its path. This Burned-Over District would become the location of many significant reform movements which were inspired by the new beliefs of the Second Great Awakening.

Seneca County was very much “caught up” in these developments. With the population growth and economic development that was taking place in Seneca County in these years, there were many new churches established during this period. The little hamlet of Bearytown (today Fayette) had three churches! It was in the town of Fayette that the establishment of a new religion—the Latter Days Saints (or Mormon) Church--arose at this time.

Another way in which new church congregations arose was because of the divided feelings about slavery. As a result of the Second Great Awakening, many people embracing the new religious beliefs became strongly anti-slavery. When the Methodist Conference did not take a strong enough stand against slavery, these anti-slavery Methodists, and anti-slavery members of other church denominations, organized in 1843 the Wesleyan Methodist Church. This was the first specifically abolitionist denomination in the United States. A Wesleyan Methodist Church was organized in Seneca Falls. The Seneca Falls Presbyterian Church ultimately lost several of its pro-slavery members because of the establishment of that Wesleyan Church and the expulsion of anti-slavery activist Rhoda Bement. The Canoga Presbyterian Church temporarily left the Presbytery because a majority of the Canoga church congregation were pro-abolition and the Presbytery did not take a strong enough stand against slavery. Altogether, by 1845 of the 781 towns in Upstate New York, 261 had at least one abolition church or a significant element of church-based abolitionism. Interestingly, these abolitionist churches were clustered along an axis formed by the Erie Canal.

Seneca County became a center for the woman’s rights movement. The leaders of this woman’s rights movement had been actively involved in the anti-slavery movement. The first woman’s rights convention in the United States was held at the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls in 1848. This was not just a co-incidence. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the other female organizers knew that that facility would willingly host another reform effort. Seneca County was also caught up in the woman’s dress reform effort known as “Bloomers” that was popularized by Amelia Jenks Bloomer in her issues of *The Lily* newspaper.

Perhaps, just perhaps, much of the current differences of opinion on so many topics—the Seneca Meadows Landfill, hydrofracking for natural gas, dissolution of the village of Seneca Falls, preservation of the Seneca White Deer, etc.—is a current manifestation of the reformist sentiment that grew out of Seneca County’s being so important a part of the Burned-Over District.

