

Reform Movements in Seneca County Before the Civil War

There are many reasons that help to explain why Seneca County became a hotbed of reform in the years preceding the Civil War. Last week's article discussed the many important transportation developments—the Great Genesee Road, the Erie Canal being linked with the Cayuga-Seneca Canal, the railroad line running from Albany to Buffalo going through Seneca Falls and Waterloo—that provided a tremendous economic stimulus to this area. Many people were drawn to these communities—people of larger cities and diverse beliefs—because of these business opportunities.

Upstate New York was so caught up in the religious revival movement of the 1820s and 1830s known as the Second Great Awakening that it became known as the Burned-Over District. (Like a forest fire that burns all the trees in its path, it was perceived there were no people left in Upstate New York to convert to Christianity.) A key preacher of the movement was the Rev. Charles Grandison Finney who preached extensively at revivals in the Auburn to Rochester area. Finney stressed that humans have free will and can choose for God. Those embracing this belief—and there were many who did—logically began to think that they should help to improve society. They looked at various evils in society and wanted to weed out those evils. In other words, the new religious zeal of the Burned-Over District is going to lead to a reforming spirit.

One very important reform movement was that of abolitionism. Various Seneca County sites became “stations” (“safe houses”) on the Underground Railroad. These sites include the carriage house of the Richard P. Hunt residence in Waterloo, the parsonage of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Seneca Falls, as well as probably several other sites.

In addition, to having actual stations on the Underground Railroad, there were other important aspects to the anti-slavery movement in Seneca County. These included the formation of the Seneca County Anti-Slavery Society in October 1837, and the first of several antislavery fairs in Seneca Falls starting in October 1843. The M'Clintock family and other Quakers were instrumental, also, in sending many anti-slavery petitions to Congress. Anti-slavery businessmen in both Seneca Falls and Waterloo started woolen mills so that people would have an alternative to slave-produced cotton. Many Seneca Falls residents became active in local units of the Free Soil Party in 1848 and the Liberty Party in the early 1850s, and the Republican Party in 1854. Carlton Seely, running as the Republican Party candidate, was elected mayor of Seneca Falls in January 1854. This is the first Republican Party election held anywhere in the United States.

Another major reform movement was that of the women's rights. It was very logical that the U.S. origins of this movement can be traced to Seneca County and the July 19-20, 1848 convention in Seneca Falls. That July, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (who had moved to Seneca Falls the preceding year) and Lucretia Mott (a Philadelphia Quaker who was in the area visiting her sister) met up with each other for the first time since their meeting in London in 1840 at the world anti-slavery convention. In London, they had experienced discrimination against females attending the conference and had decided to do something about that reality once they got back home. It might have taken eight years for them to do something but they became two key driving forces in this Seneca Falls convention that launched the women's rights movement in the United States. Deciding to hold this women's rights convention at the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls was a logical choice. The Wesleyan church had been established in 1843 as an anti-slavery

church. Its quickly constructed chapel had been used for various anti-slavery speakers and meetings.

Seneca County also played a very important role in the temperance and women's dress reform movements. The Seneca House (later known as the American Hotel) at the northwest corner of Bayard and Ovid Streets was operated by J.C. Fuller in the 1840s as a temperance hotel. At that time it was boarding house and meeting place for temperance reformers and abolitionists. Also, Amelia Jenks Bloomer began publishing *The Lily* in 1849, containing her views on temperance and various social issues. She was the first woman to own, operate and edit a news vehicle for women. It was her newspaper that helped to popularize what became known as "Bloomers" although it had actually been invented by temperance advocate Elizabeth Smith Miller. *The Lily* became a recognized forum for women's rights issues.

Some important changes in the realm of organized religion occurred in Seneca County during these years. In 1830, Joseph Smith organized the Mormon (Latter Day Saints) Church at the Peter Whitmer Farm in Fayette. Also, in the summer of 1848, Thomas and Mary Ann M'Clintock of Waterloo were instrumental in the organizing of the Congregational Friends (Progressive Friends), a more radical Quaker group than the Hicksites, as a way to increase the influence of women in affairs of the faith. They introduced joint meetings of women and men, giving women an equal voice and helping to model equality between men and women in American society.

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 brought to an end the reforming spirit to which Seneca County had been such an important contributor. This does not detract, however, from the significant contributions that were made in those years.