

Amelia Bloomer sermon – Sara Catterall, Feb 18 2024

For much of the past five years, I've been researching and writing a biography of the woman's rights and temperance activist Amelia Bloomer.

I've been asked to share a few of my thoughts from several years of studying the life of Amelia Bloomer. For today, I have chosen to tell you about how she helped to start a movement from a small village north of here before the Civil War, that grew into a national and international movement that over time gave women property rights, reproductive and divorce rights, access to education and employment and political office, and the vote.

In the first few months of every year, we are often called on to admire the great leaders of movements for justice and equity. We are not so often called on to learn about the many more people who devote their time and creative energies and hard labor to a great cause, and do so much of the necessary work. Many people in this room, and in this congregation, I know, are such people. And Amelia Bloomer was another.

Some of you may know who Amelia Bloomer was. For those that don't, I usually say, I think you've heard of bloomers? The baggy pants, maybe with a little frill at the hem? They are named for her, and out of her long life of reform work, they are the last thing she wanted to be remembered for.

She was born about forty minutes from here in the village of Homer, in the year 1818, the same year as Karl Marx, Frederick Douglass, and Lucy Stone. As another point of context, slavery was not abolished here in New York State until 1829, the summer after Bloomer turned eleven years old.

She grew up in Fayette, Ovid, and Waterloo, small rural communities. Her parents were white New Englanders, but had no wealth or high status connections. A family member described their home life as a “masculine autocracy.” She was over thirty the first time she visited a city. Her education was very simple, and ended at the eighth grade. At that time, women were trained to stay close to home, and that it was morally unacceptable for them to ever speak in a public mixed-gender gathering, even in church. As a young woman, she was very shy with strangers.

Amelia went to work as a school teacher when she was seventeen, and then as a governess in Waterloo. There she met her husband. He was a lawyer and newspaper editor from Seneca Falls, and he was anti-slavery. He had been raised a Quaker, and believed that all humans were equal before God, and that individual conscience should guide them before any other authority. After a two year courtship, they agreed to have a marriage of shared property, and mutual respect as well as love. She moved to Seneca Falls with him. He admired her writing, gave her books, encouraged her to attend political meetings, and to write about her convictions.

Shortly after she married, Bloomer suffered a bad case of malaria and whether because of the damage from that, or mercury poisoning from the medicines, or both, she never regained her health. She was infertile, and would suffer from chronic headache and stomach troubles for the rest of her life. Because of this, she developed an interest in alternative medicine, treatments with diet and exercise and fresh water. She stopped wearing tight clothing, including corsets, and she began to dress for comfort, and eat a diet full of whole grains, fruits and vegetables.

Bloomer was committed to temperance as part of her Presbyterian upbringing. She refused to drink wine at her own wedding. Temperance is often misunderstood as the simple belief that drinking alcohol is morally wrong. The idea was more that alcohol is bad for your

health, and that alcoholism destroys people's lives. And that it is not possible to know in advance who can safely drink in moderation. So they thought it was best to remove the temptation, but also to support people who suffered from alcoholism, and wanted to stop drinking. They invented the first mutual support and mentoring groups for alcoholics, similar to our AA groups today.

The temperance movement led to the women's rights movement for a few reasons. The social science of our time has proved what they observed back then: that there is a clear link between domestic violence and alcohol and drug addiction. And in 1840s New York State, men had absolute control of their families, physically and financially. Married women could not legally own any property or income, not even the clothes they wore. There were almost no paying jobs open to them. And an alcoholic man could impoverish, starve, and assault his family, with little or no legal consequences. If a wife ran away from her husband, he could sue anyone who helped her, including her own family of origin, and forbid her to see their children. So the physical, financial and psychological security of women and children was absolutely dependent on the health and character of the men. Temperance women organized to offer support and charity to the wives of alcoholics, and to petition for liquor laws, and. Amelia Bloomer's career in activism began as the organizer of one of these Ladies Temperance Societies.

She also started to write articles for temperance newspapers under pen names. They were clear and passionate and funny, and she found a few editors who would publish them.

And then, in the spring of 1848, New York State granted married women the right to own property. And that opened up the question of whether women should vote, now that they could be property owners and tax payers. That summer, a newcomer to Seneca Falls, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, helped organize a Woman's Rights Convention. Bloomer was out of town for most of it.

And it took her a little while to come around to the idea of women's rights. She was never the first to accept a radical new idea. But, she was always curious, and open to new ideas. She took her personal principles very seriously, and she took her time to consider any changes to them. But through a process of rigorous intellectual and spiritual challenges to herself, plus a few years of trying to lobby politicians on liquor legislation, she realized that most politicians don't listen to anyone unless they're afraid that they'll be voted out of office. If women wanted to change their society, they needed to be able to vote, and to hold political office.

The summer of the Seneca Falls women's rights convention, an editor dropped Bloomer's regular column from his paper. She suggested to her Ladies Temperance Society that they start a little monthly newspaper for women, which would allow them to share ideas in print, anonymously if they preferred, and from the privacy of their homes. They loved the idea, and decided to call it *The Lily*. But at the last minute, right before the January when the first issue was to be published, they got cold feet and backed out. Bloomer had a printer lined up, but she had zero experience with editing, marketing or publishing. And about this same time, her closest sister died in childbirth, which was a terrible blow to her. She could easily have given up on the *Lily*, but she wanted to finish what she had started, and she didn't want to disappoint everyone who had already subscribed. She committed to one year. She did all the work by herself, and she took on all the financial risk. Nobody believed she would succeed, not even her husband.

A few months later, her husband was appointed postmaster of the Seneca Falls, and she talked him into making her deputy postmaster. This was not a job women usually did. And it meant long hours in the post office, six days a week, just the two of them, and she already had all of her housework, plus the *Lily*, plus the care of one or two small children, plus her chronic illness. But she wanted to demonstrate that a woman could do the work as well as a man. So they

learned the business together, and she ran it on her own whenever her husband was sick or out of town.

This new job came with a little private office for her, right off the lobby. Post offices were already social centers for men, because everyone had to pick up their mail, and they would meet and talk business and politics. And now that a woman was behind the counter, more women started to drop in too, and Bloomer saw an opportunity. She received a lot of newspapers and journals as an editor, so she converted her office into a free reading room for women only, stocked with books and papers, and she invited the women of Seneca Falls to come in whenever the post office was open. Before this, village women didn't have much privacy to talk where they weren't afraid of men listening in. Also, there was no public library, and most of them couldn't afford much reading material. Bloomer's reading room became a popular center for a new political community of women in Seneca Falls. And her newspaper, the Lily, became an even larger community of like minded women. She printed their letters and articles and encouraged conversations and arguments about temperance, education, separation and divorce, labor rights, health, and the abolition of slavery. She was one of the first to publish some radical women writers of the day, including her friend Elizabeth Cady Stanton who started out writing about temperance and parenting advice. We have nothing quite like the Lily in this region today.

As part of her interest in alternative medicine, Bloomer and a lot of other women in Seneca Falls got interested in dress reform, and started to wear a modest knee length dress and loose trousers with no corset, based on traditional Turkish women's dress. She promoted it in the Lily, with pictures, other newspapers picked up the story, and the only way I can describe what happened is, she went viral. First in this country, then internationally. Journalists stuck her name

on the trousers, and nothing she ever did or said could shake that label, even though she only wore that outfit for about six years herself.

Over a few years her subscriber list grew to about two thousand, as far as Louisiana and California and London England. Her audience told her all the time how much they depended on The Lily for information, inspiration, and community. And after a while, though it was hard on her, she felt it was her duty to keep it going.

She was still living in a small village, and she dealt with disapproval and insults and hate mail every day. But she maintained her integrity, her open-mindedness, and her respect for others. Her confidence in her beliefs helped her develop the courage to face disagreement and conflict on important subjects, and to put her personal feelings second to the defense of her convictions. With practice, she got to kind of enjoy getting into the midst of a heated debate and as she put it making “the fur fly.”

She met Susan B. Anthony at temperance meetings, and she introduced her to Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Anthony and Stanton became two of the great radical leaders of the nineteenth century, and like most great leaders, they did not get there alone. They were the product of a collection of political movements and networks that allowed them to develop their ideas and their skills, and to meet each other.

Anthony had been recruited as an anti-slavery lecturer by Frederick Douglass a few years earlier, and she talked Bloomer into giving temperance lectures in public. They went on a state tour together with the Reverend Antoinette Brown who was the first woman to be ordained as a mainstream minister in this country. They gave temperance and women’s rights lectures to audiences of thousands.

But when Bloomer was at the peak of her personal fame and influence, her health caved in. She had to cancel speeches, and spent months resting and being treated in sanatoriums. When her husband lost his job at the post office, he convinced her to move West for new opportunities, first in Ohio, and then out beyond the railroad lines to the frontier of Council Bluffs Iowa, where she spent the second half of her life. Her new home was so isolated, she had to sell the Lily and give up speaking tours. She adopted two orphans, and she spent a decade living quietly as a housewife, giving her talents to local charity and her church, giving the occasional local talk, and writing some letters and articles. And she struggled with this. She felt cut off. But during the Civil War she helped organize supplies for the troops and got to know a network of women across Iowa in addition to the new friends she made through her charity work at home. And when the war ended, and the railroad finally reached her so she could travel again, she got right back into activism, as much as she could. She organized and attended big suffrage and temperance meetings, she wrote more, and addressed the attacks and misinterpretations in the press, and was elected president of the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association for a few years. They came so close to winning woman suffrage in Iowa in the 1870s.

When Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglass and many other lecturers traveled west on speaking tours, she welcomed them to stay at her home. She connected them with Western activists, and contributed to the first big History of Woman Suffrage. Her whole life, she did everything her health would allow her to do. She couldn't always do as much as people wanted her to do, but she did what she could, when she could, and she helped to teach and inspire the next generation of activists. And that was very much needed, because she died about twenty five years before any of her big legislative goals were achieved.

I wanted to tell you about her life, in part because it gave me a new perspective on this community of ours. I thought about it often while doing this research. This society, the First Unitarian Society of Ithaca, was founded in the 1860s, and the first service was presided over by the Reverend Samuel J. May. May was an abolitionist leader and a key figure in the underground railroad in this area. He was also Louisa May Alcott's uncle, if you know Little Women. He also supported Amelia Bloomer and Susan B. Anthony when a state temperance convention in Syracuse refused to hear them speak. He found them a church where they could hold their own meeting, and most of the audience followed them and abandoned the original one.

You may have attended Stephanie Ortolano's Beacon on Aurora concert series in this sanctuary. We have hosted public concerts in this room since it was built in 1893. We helped resettle refugees after World War II. We protested segregation and the Vietnam War. So much of our activity now draws directly on generations of work and relationships under this roof. And we are still active, and still changing all the time. I was a member for a few years before I realized that there is no outside money that supports us, and that most of what this society is, we create as volunteers, together. There are never enough hands to do everything we would like to do. And working together is how we get to know each other better, and share ideas, and support each other. These Sunday services are the tip of the iceberg.

Good leadership is rare and precious, and so is the person who sticks around to help wash dishes and wipe down the tables, the people who make phone calls and soup, who join or lead teams and small group ministries, and start new ones, who teach a class, clean the gutters, or deliver flowers and stay for a talk with an old member who can't be here in person anymore. Doing some of these things is how I have gotten to know this community, and learn about our history and all our work and connections in the larger community. I have been inspired and



enlightened by people who show up to all the protests, and the people show up to weed our garden in the summer. And when I have been disappointed or upset by other members, it has been a good opportunity for me to learn how to handle conflict, and focus on making this community work for all of us, together, a never ending messy business, like any group of human beings in a committed long term relationship.

I have said that Amelia Bloomer did every little thing she could. A common women's fundraising ploy of her time was called a mite pocket. A mite means a little something, a bit, and the pockets were bags that you would hang on the wall to collect any penny you or your visitors could spare for a particular cause, to be donated at a "mite meeting" each month. When people wrote to Amelia Bloomer for autographs, she often responded with the same short paragraph "In the grand providential movements of the age the individual is of little account. We all have a work to do, and it is a great joy to feel that we may aid with our mite in hastening the coming of the Truth and the Right.

Making our world a better place is exhausting work. A lot of the time it is full of disappointments and failures and drudgery. Community keeps us going. We give each other hope and encouragement to continue through connection and showing up for the work, year after year, generation after generation. Justice and equity are a way of life, though you may have more to give at some times of your personal life than in others. It's okay. Every mite counts. And when you are part of a community, you realize that we tag team each other. If illness or poverty or grief sidelines one of us, we can know who is out there carrying on, and our support for each other can be part of the work too.

Thank you.