



Among the American institutions most in need of reform in the realm of sexual stereotyping were the church, the schools, and the law. The nineteenth century saw advances made in many of these areas; indeed, the seeds of dissent were sown, and despite the prevailing attitude of scorn for the issue of women's rights, the seeds steadfastly germinated, and grew.

The Cornell Library, a gift from Ezra Cornell, was located on the southeast corner of Tioga and Seneca Streets in Ithaca and served from 1866 to 1960. "Library Hall," a lecture room within, was a popular gathering place for local debate.

Institutions

THE CHURCH

The first Tompkins County churches were built around the turn of the eighteenth century, soon after the settlers' most basic needs of food and shelter had been met. Often several denominations took turns using one building, which became the schoolhouse during the week. This all-purpose structure was usually a small log cabin, approximately 20-by-26 feet or 20-by-36 feet, 12 feet high to a flat roof.

But each congregation wanted its own building, and the sooner the better. Many of these new churches were constructed between 1820 and 1830 and consisted of a frame house with long, high windows, a peaked roof, and a steeple "which pointed as far toward heaven as the funds permitted."¹

An Unlikely Scene

A glimpse inside one of these churches would have presented an unlikely scene. For one, the congregation would probably seem uncommonly weary due to the several-mile journey to church, and in anticipation of the services.

Public services on Sunday were held both in the forenoon and in the afternoon, and there was a third service, of a less formal character, in the evening.²

Another peculiarity was that the social position of each worshipper was reflected in the seating arrangements. The privilege of sitting in a particular pew was regularly sold or rented to parishioners to help round out the church coffers. The Ludlowville Presbyterian Church built its sanctuary such that the side pews stood several inches above those in the middle. Predictably, the elevated seats sold for the most money. A local historian tells us:

In some churches the grading was according to the sums given to the church, 40 shillings [\$4.80] counting one degree toward a high seat. In other churches the seats were sold to the highest bidder.³

In fact, most churches were so far in debt that they actually charged admission to services. But there was usually a "free" area in the rear; unruly boys flocked back there and spent the sermonizing hours happily carving away at the seats.

The level of religious intensity varied throughout the years, revivals occurring in periods of economic depression. This area experienced one such spiritual peak in the late 1820s. Recalled the Reverend H. F. Titus fifty years later:

Religion was the topic of conversation on the street corners. Prayer meetings were extemporized in store, kitchens, yard. At all hours, the voice of strong crying and supplication was heard. One could not walk the streets at mid-

night or at the earliest morning without being reminded of one theme — salvation.⁴

Woman's Place

In the early churches, as in most institutions, women were expected to be unobtrusive. They were essential in the day-to-day functioning of the church, often more so than men, yet held virtually no decision-making power and never participated in the service.⁵

Except on at least one occasion. In 1831 an extraordinary thing happened in the First Methodist Church of Ithaca. A traveling prophetess entered and "insisted that she had a special message to our congregation, and *must* preach."⁶ The idea of a woman speaking from the pulpit was simply out of the question, but it was agreed that when the proper time came she could deliver her message from one of the front pews instead.

The regular sermon ended, and the preacher announced that it was time for "social exercises" — this was her cue. The Reverend Dr. Paddock remembered her unexpected response:

Whereupon Miss T. arose very deliberately, took off her bonnet, marched up to the vacated pulpit, and without further apology or further preliminaries, announced as her text, Revelations, xii: "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars"; and preached fully an hour and a half.⁷

The Reverend concluded that it was "ludicrous in the highest degree" that she actually assumed a spot at the pulpit, and moreover that both he and the rest of the congregation "never fully recovered from it."⁸

Later in 1852, another skeptic reviewed the episode and commented:

A woman out of her proper sphere is, indeed, a "wonder"; and [we] trust that this incident will have a good influence upon any of our fair readers, who may have imbibed the strange notions, which are current in some quarters, at the time we write.⁹

A woman was again seen behind the sacred pulpit when the Widow Van Cott, a traveling revivalist, stopped in Ithaca forty-eight years later in 1879. Again, there were those who did not fully appreciate her visit. "The appearance of a woman in the pulpit did not seem to have a very elevating effect upon some of those in attendance at the State Street Methodist Church during the Van Cott revival," reported Rev. Mr. Hogoboom, the pastor. He

apparently had to contend with persons "who defiled the new carpets and pews with tobacco juice" and one rowdy individual who was ordered out of the church, though "the order was not obeyed until a scuffle ensued."¹⁰

One local put it very simply – "It don't look good to see a woman preach."¹¹

The More Religious

Women often attended church more faithfully and were more involved with church activities than the men. This was a local as well as national pattern observed by numerous historians.¹² Many local stories of fanatically religious women have survived.

When the log-cabin school was erected at the east end of the cemetery, it was used for Sunday services. An early member of this Asbury class [in Lansing] was a "shouting Methodist." One day when attending a meeting in the log house, she became enthusiastically happy bringing her foot [down] and through the worn floor.

Another character was Miss Louisa Collins; she was very devout and used to pray devoutly at revival meetings. Very plain in her attire, . . . when teased about the embroidery around the wrists of her gloves, she laboriously picked it out with a pin.¹³

And on and on. One historian proposes:

In this setting, the Christian religion provided an outlet, a release for women's emotional frustrations, grievances, and longings. Prayer, sacrifice, disciplined behavior, all part of the ritualistic religious scene, satisfied many of their needs. Since the next world offered them far better prospects than the present one, they were comforted by the promise of salvation.¹⁴

Others spoke of the woman's extra burden of upholding the high standards of goodness and virtue. Any conflicting emotions associated with this image had to be redirected.

In the still-mysterious inner sanctum of the human mind the psychological drives toward religion and sex are almost surely close affiliates. . . . Unconscious desires found outlets in revivals and in the busy campaign of reforming crusades.¹⁵



Deborah LaRrett

If nothing else, church involvement was appealing to women simply for its social value – a convenient excuse to get together, enjoy the company of other women, and be temporarily freed from the responsibilities of everyday life.

Efforts for the Church

In many cases the fate of the church rested on sturdy female shoulders. It was the women who organized the continual fund-raising for lights, pews, repairs, salaries, heating, debt payments on the building, and virtually the entire church budget. They provided flowers, dinners, choir robes, held social receptions, not to mention getting the necessary cleanings done. When sticky varnished pews caused a Lansing congregation extreme consternation – "the rippling, crackling noise of the worshippers severing themselves from the pews was terrible to hear" – the following Sunday they all brought newspapers for protection. It was the women who afterwards "found it necessary" to scrub the pews of the remaining newsprint.¹⁶

Yes, it was the ladies who could be counted on to do the multitude of church jobs. A few examples:

The Women of the church [of the Epiphany, Trumansburg] were given permission by the vestry at its June 15, 1905 meeting, to build an addition to the chapel . . .¹⁷

In 1831 [the women] presented the church [St. John's Parish, Ithaca] with a communion service, and from that day to this [1912] they have been benefactors in a hundred ways. . . .¹⁸

[The Brotherhood of the First Methodist Episcopal Church in 1906 were doing] a systematic visitation among the sick and newcomer, but soon found that it demanded too much time for a lot of businessmen to do justice to the work, and soon began to draft the ladies into service. . . .¹⁹

The Woman's Auxiliary [of the Church of the Epiphany] came to the front again in January of 1912 and was given permission to finance the laying of new oak flooring in the nave, chancel, sanctuary, organ and sacristy transepts.²⁰

Yet the ladies of the Church needed "permission" to do all of this work.