

FROM THE COLLECTIONS

Love, Travel, and Rumor: New Findings on the Life of the Reverend N.W.T. Root, a Principal Actor in Portland's Nineteenth-Century Drama, "The Perils of Lemira Pennell"

BY ELIZABETH SHEEHAN

AMONG THE newly acquired Banks/Brinkler Family Papers (Coll. #2127) are manuscript material, photographs, drawings and official documents relating to Reverend Nathaniel W.T. Root, canon of Portland's Episcopal Cathedral, Pastor of St. Paul's Church, and a key figure in a largely forgotten religious and social controversy.

In 2003, when I completed a paper on Lemira Pennell, a nineteenth century insane asylum reformer and inmate, and Reverend Root, the man she accused of improprieties, I had to content myself with a brief description of Root's life drawn from an obituary and from Lemira's writings. Working with materials available from the Maine Historical Society and Portland's Episcopal archives, I had hoped to draw full character portraits of Lemira and the clergy alleged to be involved, but I was stymied by the lack of available information on both her minister (Reverend Root) and Portland's prominent Episcopal Bishop Henry Adams Neely. Twelve pamphlets written by Lemira Pennell and published from 1874-1891 are in the Historical Society archives (Maine S.C.# 765). Numerous records, sermons, and letters written by Bishop Neely are on file at the Episcopal Archives in Portland.

I went forward with these incomplete sources and then spent the next year researching Jeremiah Hacker, a nineteenth century Quaker newspaper publisher and social reformer. (Hacker's newspaper, *The Portland Pleasure Boat*, published from 1845 to 1866, is in seventeen volumes, Coll # QJ 917.36 P837.) Meanwhile, Bill Barry and the Historical Society staff uncovered the Reverend Root's early papers among the newly acquired Banks/Brinkler family papers. (Mrs. Charles [Florence] Banks was the Reverend Root's daughter.) These papers range from the 1840s to the 1870s and include an autograph book from Rev. Root's college years, a love letter to his wife just prior to their marriage, a date

book from his first year serving parishioners in Portland, and, most telling, a letter from his wife to the mayor of Portland asking for the newspaper account of his death to quell “rumors” about it and the mayor’s official reply. His travel diaries, pencil sketches, and children’s stories support the profile drawn in Episcopal Church writings that the Reverend Root had all of the artistic and literary talent that one would expect from the refined and extensive education and travel that his background would produce (*NorthEast* #4, January 1873, p. 27).

The woman at the heart of this controversy, Lemira Clarissa Ormsby Pennell (1821-1893), was born near Gardiner and became a communicant of the Episcopal Church as a young woman. She married Francis Pennell in November 1843 and had two children. In the late 1860s, she was a middle-aged widow living in Portland and one of the founding members of the new St. Paul’s, the church built near the bottom of Munjoy Hill to serve members there after the 1866 fire. According to Lemira’s pamphlets, she socialized fairly frequently with Reverend Root and his wife in his capacity as the priest at St. Paul’s and canon of the equally new Cathedral. It was during one of these occasions, Lemira asserts, that Root “talked and behaved shamefully” at her house. From December 1871, the time of the alleged event, until 1873 Lemira approached the Episcopal hierarchy, working through the chain of command from her local wardens to the Bishop.

On December 14, 1872, Root died of smallpox in the Pest House portion of the Portland Alms House and was temporarily interred in the Alms House “Yard” (Jordan, *Eastern Cemetery*, 1987, p. 160). According to Episcopal sources, Reverend Root contracted smallpox while working among its victims on Munjoy Hill, a duty he took on less than a year after he was accused of sexual misconduct. (To add to the complexity of accounts of Reverend Root’s death, a newly uncovered Yale University obituary states that the Reverend Root contracted smallpox while in Boston following the 1872 fire and epidemic while researching sources for his publications. See *Record of the Class of 1852 Yale College*, 466.852, Vol. 5)

The Archdiocese sent lawyers to insist that Lemira retract her accusation in writing. Her refusal initiated cycles of incarceration in insane asylums and poor houses from 1878 until her death in 1893 in the Augusta Mental Health Institute. In the interim, in 1883, she sued the doctors involved in her incarceration. Unfortunately, Maine law protected doctors, holding them responsible only for their diagnosis, not the actual commitment, which was the provenance of selectman and other town officials. She also wrote and published twelve pamphlets on her

personal experience in insane asylums and detailed proposals for revising the physical conditions of the hospitals.

Lemira's arguments for the righteousness of her case appeal to the moral superiority of women, a connection that linked her particular cause with women's roles in sexual and social spheres:

This is a question which deeply concerns women, and no truly womanly woman can help feeling that she has been belittled by social contact with a man who has been openly charged all these years with such gross crimes as Bishop Neely has been able to disprove, or attempted to escape from otherwise than by saying, 'the same charges are made against other clergymen.' (*The Memorial Scrapbook*, 1883).

Lemira appealed to other women and made her case through church-sanctioned, and then outside women's networks. As a member of the Episcopal Church, she first approached the warden's wives (1871) with her concerns, and later, as this and lawyers failed her, she appealed in person to women members of St. Mark's in Augusta, after being refused communion. (She had been excommunicated nine years before.) Throughout her incarcerations and struggles with the church, her pamphlets were published by Boston supporters, including Julia Ward Howe. Lemira's ability to sustain connections with other grass-roots and prominent women kept her cause alive throughout her life and produced documents that sustain knowledge of her case and advocacy.

With the addition of some of Rev. Root's early papers, we have a detailed personal glimpse of how his economically and socially privileged life and development of the literary, social, and artistic expression it afforded related to Lemira Pennell's. The Banks-Brinker (Root) Collection augments the visual and genealogical dimensions of Reverend Root's life as a young man, a husband, father, and artist. It helps us understand his character and the context of his life as both priest and human being. Lemira Pennell's pamphlets illustrate the course of her development from victim to social critic, writer, and activist. Both contribute to our knowledge of how the personal dimensions of nineteenth century social issues such as institutional and sexual politics, mental health, and class were enacted in Maine.

Maine Collection # 2127
 Pamphlets Written by Lemira Pennell
 1874-1891

A Circular on Diocesan Matters in Maine (MHS Coll.) 3 p., January 1874.

Sanitary Matters at Large and Elsewhere (Lewiston; MHS Coll.), 1879.

The Memorial Scrap Book. A Combination of Precedents (Boston: n.p., 1883).

Another Section of the "M.S.B." by L.C. P.: A Boomerang for a Swarm of B.B.B.'s (Boston: n.p., 1884)

Health Matters: A Drama (Christmas 1884).

Prospectus of Hospital Revelations: How Opinions Vary (n.p., 1885).

This Red Book Is Partly a Reprint of What Was Published in 1883, and Later; and Earlier Letters From Prominent Men; Instructions From Dr. Harlow, from Springfield; His Letters from the Hospitals and Much Else (Boston: n.p., 1886).

Hospital Revelations (n.p., 1888).

An Explanation to the Public as to Why Mrs. Lemira Clarissa Pennell Was Confined to the Insane Hospital and the Portland Poor House (Augusta, Maine: n.p., 188[?]).

New Horrors (n.p., 1890).

High Church and Low Church Vs. Morality!!—A Sequel to the 6th Edition of 'This Red Book' (Boston, August 1891).

Leave to Withdraw (Boston: n.p., n.d.).

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