

“Achan in this Church”: Rev. Joseph Myers in Brockport, 1828-32

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One of the difficulties in writing local history is relating the general themes of American and New York history to the people and events of a particular community such as Brockport. An even greater difficulty is the lack of detailed information about our earliest residents; most of them remain little more than names. Rev. Joseph Myers, the first minister of the Presbyterian Church in Brockport, lived here only from 1828 to 1832 (Crandall and Dedman 2-3; Hale 9). In some ways his brief career was quite ordinary, revealing a little of the routines of a small village. He is also Brockport's link to one of the most significant and controversial events in the history of western New York—Charles Grandison Finney's the great Rochester revival of 1830-31.

Joseph Myers was born in Herkimer, NY, about 1805, the son of Joseph Myers and Abigail Harter (Stanton). After local schools, he graduated from Union College, now Auburn Theological Seminary, in 1821. He may have then attended the Princeton Theological Seminary. He became pastor of the Presbyterian Church in LeRoy, New York, in 1824, being formally installed on December 28, 1825 (Hotchkin 548). The church in Brockport was established on March 28, 1828, with eight members, some of whom transferred from the Sweden Center [NY] Church (1816-1935) (Records). During the year the newly formed church was served by a number of visiting clergymen. This is the first mention of Meyers in Brockport:

Sunday, July 13, 1828. Sent by the Presbytery, Rev. & Mrs. Myers from LeRoy to Preach and we gave him 16/-- (Records).

Subsequent sermons are recorded in August and November. On September 19<sup>th</sup> he was received by the Rochester Presbytery and became the state supply pastor in Brockport (Parsons 39). On February 27, 1829, Mrs. Lydia Hall Myers became a member of the church. (Records) Rev. Myers was not formally installed as pastor until January, 1830.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> instant, Rev. Joseph Myers was installed Pastor of the Presbyterian Church, in Brockport; the services were as follows.

Introductory prayer, by Rev. Mr. Ward, of Riga, and sermon by the Rev. Mr. Penney, of this village [Rochester]. Rev. Chauncey Cook presided, proposed the usual questions, and declared the Pastoral relation constitutes. Rev. Mr. Lane, of Clarkson, gave the charge to the Pastor. Rev. Mr. Sedgwick [of Ogden] addressed the Congregation, and Rev. Mr. Cook offered the concluding prayer. (Rochester Observer Jan. 22, 1830)

We know a little about Myers' family. According to the 1830 census, the household consisted of Joseph and Lydia, both in their thirties, a teenage girl (possibly a servant), and two daughters under the age of five. One of these was Margaret Moriah, baptized on May 19, 1829 (Records). On February 8,

1831, a third daughter, Mary, was baptized; sadly she died on March 16<sup>th</sup> of the same year at the age of four months (Brockport Free Press Mar. 23, 1831). At the end of the year there was another death:

Died in this village, on Monday morning last, Mrs. Lydia Myers, consort of the Rev. Joseph Myers—aged 37 years. (Free Press Dec. 23, 1831)

In a number of sources we find brief notices of Meyers' carrying out the usual tasks of his vocation. On several occasions he administered the Lord's Supper and performed baptisms at the church in Sweden Center (Church in Sweden Mar. 14, June 25, 1830; July 6, 1831). On March 18, 1830 he presided there over one session of the lengthy trial of Reuben Stickney for “Unchristian language” and other charges. Accounts of weddings he performed appear regularly in Brockport and Rochester newspapers through 1829 and 1830. This is among the first:

Marriages. In Brockport, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> inst. By the Rev. Mr. Myers; Mr. Elias Pond, to Miss Caroline Heacock. Also Mr. Daniel Seeley to Miss Julia Taylor, all of that place. (Antimasonic Inquirer Sept. 16, 1829)

In February, 1830, we find him preaching a sermon at the semiannual meeting of the Rochester Presbytery (Rochester Observer Feb. 2, 1830) and the next year becoming Clerk of the Presbytery (Free Press Mar. 9, 1831). He participated in the installation of Rev. Charles E. Furman as pastor of the Congregational Church in Clarkson (Free Press Feb 9, 1831). The next year he was part of the dedication of a new Presbyterian church in Holley (Free Press June 20, 1832).

In June, 1830, the church completed and dedicated “a commodious house of worship, fifty feet in length, by forty in breadth” on land given by James and Mira Seymour (Hotchkin 497). Seymour was the first sheriff of Monroe County and a major landowner in Brockport. The present church (1852-53) is on this land. Myers soon organized a Sabbath School. Its first superintendent was Robert Love, a local carpenter and one of the founding members of the church; we shall hear more of Brother Love later. We also find Myers serving on a committee which looked into and recommended establishing an “Infant School” in Brockport for children under the age of six (Free Press Jan. 19, 26, 1831). He was one of six Brockporters who endorsed a new “Classical and Select School” started by Mr. Sullivan Carvernao (Free Press Sept. 21, 1831).

The temperance movement was Myers' most conspicuous public interest. Beginning in 1830 temperance meetings were reported at the Presbyterian church. In 1831 and 1832 he was elected President of the Brockport Temperance Society (Free Press Jan. 5, 1831; Jan. 4, 1832). On a number of occasions he participated in the activities of the Young Men's Temperance Society, such as giving the benediction at their big Fourth of July celebration in 1831 (Free Press July 29). At a meeting at the Baptist church,

Rev. Mr. Myers addressed the assembly; after bestowing many encomiums upon the perseverance and energy of the society, the gentleman remarked that he was astonished to learn the fact that twenty vendors of ardent spirits infested our community. He was pained in view of the fact, still more so, though it ought to be known, that they who profess to be washed in the blood of Christ, are engaged in the traffick. The churches should awake to the fact.

(Free Press Oct. 19, 1831)

On March 24<sup>th</sup> of this year, the Presbyterian Church decreed that “persons who shall hereafter unite with this church . . . [shall] abstain from the Traffic or use of Distilled Liquor except as medicines or for chemical purposes” (Records). Subsequent enforcement of this resolution proved difficult and time consuming. A similar resolution had been passed the the Congregational Church in Clarkson the preceding November (Free Press Dec. 8, 1830).

Temperance was an important element in the spirit of religious reform and renewal in the United States in the early nineteenth century. Generally known as the Second Great Awakening, this movement was particularly strong in western New York, which was called the “burned-over district,” swept with the flames of religious enthusiasm. The most prominent event was the Rochester Revival of 1830-31, led by the evangelist Charles Grandison Finney. To one scholar, no more impressive revival has occurred in American history” (Cross 155). This revival, its causes and consequences, have been studied by a number of historians, including Paul E. Johnson in A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837. Rev. Myers was a supporter of Finney's work and was influential in bringing him to Brockport.

After successes in Philadelphia and New York City, Finney began preaching in Rochester in September, 1830. He soon began receiving invitations to preach in surrounding communities—Clarkson (see Appendix). Brighton, Chili, Henrietta. Palmyra, Batavia, and many others (Finney Papers). In November, Myers first wrote to Finney.

Brockport, Nov. 18, 1830

Dear Brother,

Though a Stranger, I trust I need make no other apology foaddressing you, than an earnest desire to see you in Brockport.

I learn by one of the members of my church who was in Rochester last week, that you gave him some encouragement that you would make us a visit in a short time. I have also heard that you expected to be in Ogden next week on Wednesday. Now will it not be consistent for you to come from Ogden to this place, & preach to us on Thursday evening? I shall be happy to see you, if it be the Lord's will to direct your course this way, & to have you stay as long as duty to Christ & his cause will permit.

I hear much of what the Lord is doing for souls in Rochester, & I trust my heart rejoices in it, altho owing to the circumstances of my family, it has not appeared consistent for me to visit the highly favored spot since the good work commenced. I hope, however, (the Lord willing) to be there to former part of next week.

We have some faint tokens of the Lord's special presence or coming in the midst of us.

Please inform me by the bearer whether & when I may expect you. I doubt not your calls from various sources are numerous and pressing, but I trust ours (as you have probably heard something of our situation & circumstances) will not be deemed the least important.

Yours in the bonds of the gospel,  
Joseph Myers

This appeal evidently did not succeed, so a month later Myers wrote again.

Ogden, Dec. 19, 1830

Dear Brother,

I exchanged yesterday with Brother Sedgwick. The good work appears to be going forward with great interest here. I learnt from Capt. Ball that you thought you could come to Brockport next week—I sincerely hope you will come at that time. We need your help now very much indeed. Among my people the number of conversions & hopeful conversions in increasing—but most of our prominent men remain unmoved. Do come and may the Lord come with you in great power.

Please drop me a line saying when you will be with us (deo volente)--I should like to have you at our place on Wed, afternoon, & as much longer as you can stay. Should there be sleighing we will send for you; if not come in the stage to Clarkson & we will send there for you.

Yours in the bonds & hopes of the Gospel,

J. Myers

Finney's visit to Brockport took place in this month or early January of the next year. The direct evidence for his visit is a subsequent complaint by Robert Love that “he thought Mr. Finney and Mr. [Lewis] Cheeseman would have staid longer if Mr. Myers had been awake and requested it (Records, Nov. 1, 1831). The immediate effect was a surge in conversions; the sixteen people who joined the Presbyterian Church in January, 1831, most of them “by relation of their experiential religion,” were more than had joined in all of the preceding years. The steady flow of converts continued until June, when there was a great Four-Days Meeting with “Preaching each day in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the evening on the Lord's Day (Records, June 2, 1831). Myers was also one of ten area ministers who preached with Finney during a Four-Days Meeting and the Second and Third Presbyterian Churches in Rochester (Rochester Observer Mar. 3, 1831).

A few comments may be made about the Brockport revivals, especially with regards to Professor Johnson's interpretation of Finney's work in Rochester. The Brockport revivals of 1831, 1832, 1833, and 1838 do not support the view that “Canal towns that were devoted to Commerce were relatively immune to revivals (Johnson 137). The Brockport church was also visited in 1831 by Rev. Lewis Cheeseman of Wheatland, who had a more than local reputation as an evangelist. A Protracted Meeting in Brockport is described in the Rochester Observer of April 11, 1832. The revival of April, 1833, was led by Rev. Jedidiah Burchard (Hotchkiss 496). Except during the Spring of 1833, women were approximately 60 % of the members of the church, a ratio which, in contrast to Rochester, did not change during revivals. Johnson's book has been justly criticized for its relative neglect of the role of women in the churches (Blumberg). Nor does the Brockport experience confirm his main thesis that

Finney's success was a “middle-class solution to the problems of class, legitimacy, and order generated in the early stages of manufacturing” (Bushman). Because of its small population (only 685 in the 1830 Census) and relatively undeveloped industry, Brockport did not have the social structure of Rochester. Politically, however, the town of Sweden did support the Coalition/Antimasonic bid of Henry Clay to unseat Andrew Jackson in 1832. The converts in Brockport were not the most prominent members of the community, a fact alluded to in Myers' second letter to Finney. None of the Presbyterian converts were among those who signed notices supporting Jackson in the Free Press.

This is not, however, to suggest that there were not difficulties in Brockport. On July 7, 1831, a controversy which had been brewing for some time between Myers and Robert Love broke out. Six charges of “Unchristian conduct” by Brother Love were brought by Jacob Sutphin to the Church's Standing Committee. The main points are in the first two charges:

1. Improper intermeddling with the Pastor in his official duties at sundry times for more than two years past—thereby disturbing his peace and hindering his usefulness.
2. Slandering our pastor by representing him as the Achan in this church—as hindering the blessing of God and the prosperity of this Church and congregation.

Achan's looting of the ruins of Jericho had brought great, though temporary difficulty to the Isrealite army (Joshua 7). The thrust of Love's complaint was not that Myers had been helping himself to some Philistine booty, but that he had not supported the revivals enthusiastically enough. According to one witness, “Mr. Love did say that he considered Mr. Myers as the hindering cause of revival” (Records Nov. 1, 1831). Love's defenses included bringing a series of charges against Myers to the Rochester Presbytery:

“The course which Mr. Myers has pursued in the year past especially in the revival in Brockport the last Winter and at the close of the four-day meeting lately held there has led me to the painful conclusion that he [Myers] does not understand the nature and Spirit of that Gospel which he profess to believe and preach.

The course he has pursued in reference to many of the female Members of his Church in regards to their taking an active part in our social meetings for prayer has been a great grief to them so that they have not come up to that standard of usefulness which the Gospel requires. . . .”

(Records Nov. 3, 1831)

The later charge is particularly interesting. One of the recurrent themes in the evangelical movement of the early nineteenth century was the increased importance of women in the churches; explicit religious equality brought increasing social equality and implied other kinds of equality as well. Evidently Myers was something of a traditionalist on this point. It also emerged that Myers tried to discourage Love from organizing interdenominational prayer meetings.

The ensuing controversy lasted for nearly a year, fought at several levels within the church and in the Presbytery of Rochester. Myers' supporters won some of the battles, Love's won others. At one point the congregation voted to dismiss the Standing Committee, which had taken Myers' side (Records Jan. 30, 1832). In the event, neither won the war. According to an 1894 copy of the original Records and a now lost membership list, Love was dismissed by letter in 1834 to Michigan, and in 1877 was reported living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (McIntosh 162). Beset by a divided church and grieved by the death of his wife and daughter, Myers also left. The last record of him in Brockport is his signing the Church's Annual Report on April 12, 1832. He was formally dismissed to Niagara Presbytery June 27, 1832 to become pastor of the Church in Lockport (Parsons 39). Our last Brockport notice shows him reestablished with a new bride:

Married. In Rochester, on the 14<sup>th</sup> inst. By the Rev. Dr. [Joseph] Penny, Rev. Joseph Myers, Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Lockport, (and formerly of this village) to Miss Harriet Hatch.

(Free Press Nov. 28, 1832)

Among other things, Miss Hatch had been active in Rochester with a group of women organizing a mission school for orphaned girls. Myers served in Lockport until July 8, 1834 (Hotchkin 510). He later appears as a pastor in the Onondaga County communities of Waterville (1836-39), Salina (1839-44), and Liverpool (1853-55) (Hotchkin 326, 323; Stanton). He died in Liverpool February 9, 1860 (Stanton).

#### Appendix: Two Letters from Clarkson

Finney's visit to Brockport may well have included a stop in Clarkson was well. The spirit of revival was certainly there: "a short season of refreshing has been enjoyed in one neighborhood of the [Clarkson] society in which twenty or more have hopefully been converted to God" (Free Press Dec. 8, 1830). The Finney papers at Oberlin College contain a number of letters from Rev. Charles E. Furman. Transcribed here are letters by two individuals urging Finney to preach in Clarkson. Both comment briefly on the social implications of the revival, the middle class aiming at the upper.

#### I.

Dear Br.

I just drop a line to you saying our meeting last night was awfully solemn [sic.] and those present deeply affected—We have a greater show of intelligence in this place than usual for such villages and the intelligence has been principally among the wicked who have hitherto borne rule.

There seems to me to be a shaking amongst this very class of people, and I just wanted to suggest (will it be presumption?--) that you give us your sermon upon the text "The wages of sin is death."

I would not, however, dictate. I fear in the suggestion I have done too much.

Yours,

Rec. C.E. Furman

Clarkson, Nov. 26, 1830

.II.

Clarkson, 23 [Dec. ?] 1830

Brother F. will please excuse the liberty I take in addressing him—Our minister, with whom I board, has been, expecting an appointment by you, to preach in our village.

If there ever was a time when your labours were needed & would be accepted in Clarkson I think it is now—The Lord has evidently taken sinners in hand, and many of the high headed and influential are struggling even at the very gate of Heaven—Christians want instructing very much and our minister does all he can, but is not used to conducting Revivals, and feels he knows not what to do--

Mr. Furman and the church are all wanting you to come, and I hope and pray that the Lord will lead you if right—can you not come next week?

Yours, & c.

T.T. Pond

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