

Amelia Jenks Bloomer 1818–1894

Moving to Seneca Falls

Amelia Jenks was born in Homer, New York. In her late teens, she became a governess for a wealthy family in Seneca Falls, then a booming manufacturing center on the Erie Canal. Like any trade route, the canal spread new ideas along its path, and brought a fair share of mavericks and entrepreneurs to the area. Seneca Falls was fertile ground for the reformist spirit.

In 1840, Amelia married Dexter Bloomer, who had just purchased, with a friend, the *Seneca County Courier*. They omitted the word “obey” from their vows, a clue to Amelia’s early thinking about women’s rights. Dexter encouraged her to write articles for the *Courier* and other reform-minded papers, which she did anonymously. She later described her young self as a “shrinking, bashful woman.”

The Temperance Cause

Amelia’s interest in temperance began before she married Dexter Bloomer, who gave up alcohol after their wedding. They were part of a growing movement that had formed in the 1820s, as American alcohol consumption reached an all-time high. In temperance circles, drinking was viewed as immoral, un-Christian, and destructive of family life. Temperance reform was seen as a moral issue, well within women’s sphere, but it was also an opportunity to grapple



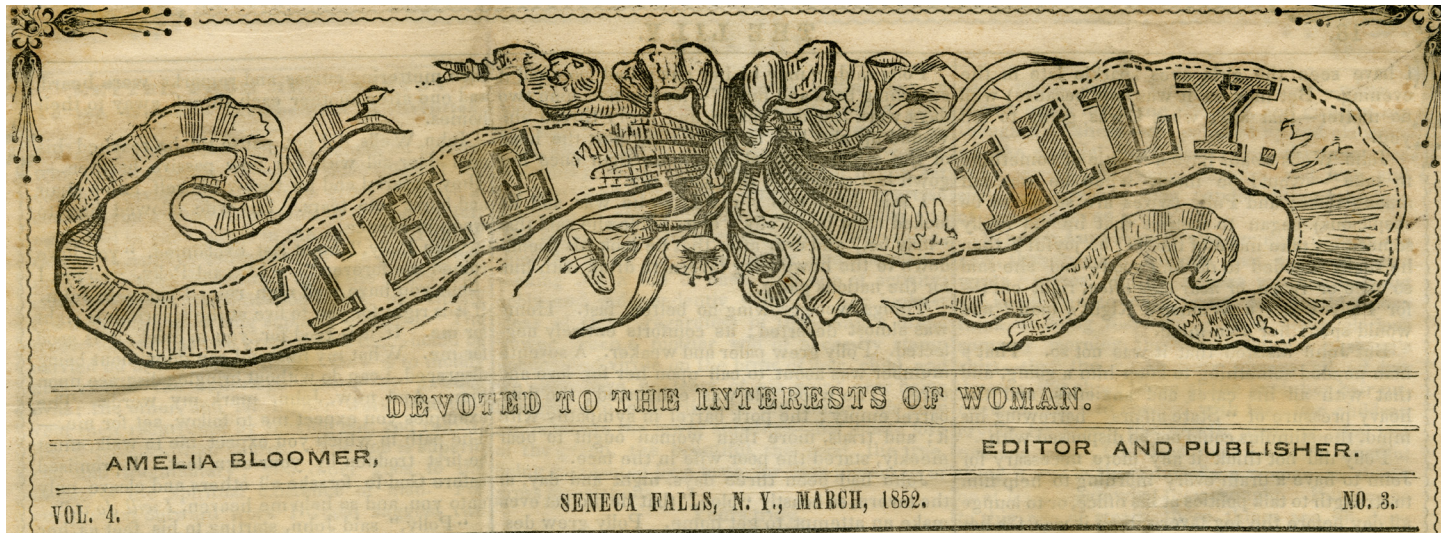
Amelia Jenks Bloomer, 1850s. Daguerreotype. Property of the Seneca Falls Historical Society.

with a problem that deeply affected the lives of many women. When wives were abused or abandoned by drunken husbands, under the rules of coverture they had no recourse other than charity. For Amelia Bloomer, Susan B. Anthony, and many other women, temperance activity was a stepping stone in their later commitment to women’s rights.

But the women of these reform movements were not all cut from the same cloth. For Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who moved to Seneca Falls in 1847, Amelia Bloomer was too conservative, too closely tied to her Episcopal church. Bloomer attended only part of the 1848 women’s rights convention, did not sign the Declaration of Sentiments, and, Stanton complained, “stood aloof and laughed at us.”

Dexter Bloomer said Amelia had not, at the time of the convention, given much thought to women’s rights. Temperance remained her great cause. In August 1848, she started *The Lily*, a temperance journal that was also the country’s first newspaper by and for women. It was borne of her frustration with women’s second-class status in the male-dominated temperance movement. Bloomer edited the paper and wrote most of the articles, but in November 1849, she began publishing pieces by her fiery neighbor, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Some people saw Stanton’s influence behind the paper’s widening interest in women’s rights.

Amelia Jenks Bloomer 1818–1894 *continued*



Discussion Questions

- ★ What cause drew Amelia Jenks Bloomer into the reform scene? How did this affect her activism?
- ★ How did Amelia Jenks Bloomer spread the word about her cause?
- ★ What does Amelia Jenks Bloomer's relationship to Elizabeth Cady Stanton reveal about the early women's rights movement?

Amelia Bloomer, *The Lily*, March 1852. Newspaper. New-York Historical Society Library, HV5285 L5 v.4, no.3.

Dress Reform and Women's Rights

Bloomer may be better known for dress reform than for temperance. In the pages of *The Lily*, she promoted the astonishing new outfit that she, Stanton, and others were wearing, a short dress over wide pants called pantaloons. People associated the style with her, and it became known as the Bloomer outfit (see [Resource 18](#)). She did support dress reform and women's rights, but she believed that temperance was more important. Elizabeth Cady Stanton found this troubling. "You must take Mrs. Bloomer's suggestions with great caution," she wrote to Susan B. Anthony, "for she has not the spirit of a true reformer."

Women's reform movements, like all groups committed to a cause, were composed of intense, passionate people who did not always blend well. Amelia Bloomer was a fiercely dedicated, religious woman who, her husband admitted, "took life too seriously."

Mrs. Stanton was a big personality, confident and witty. The two worked together on causes that mattered deeply to



N. Currier (firm), *The Bloomer Costume*, 1851. Lithograph. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., 90711963.

them, but not without disagreements and rivalry. In 1880, some thirty years after both women had lived in Seneca Falls, the *Seneca Falls Reveille* published a reminiscence that credited Mrs. Stanton with turning *The Lily* into "the organ of the women's rights party." Amelia Bloomer wrote to the *Reveille* to complain of "malicious misrepresentation. . . . That it ever became her 'organ,' or in any way subject to her control, is untrue."

Amelia and Dexter Bloomer moved to Ohio in 1853, and two years later to Iowa, where they adopted two sons. With no printing facilities available, Amelia sold *The Lily*, which failed without her leadership. She remained committed to temperance and to women's rights, and served as the president of the Iowa Woman Suffrage Society.

Sources: "Amelia Bloomer – Publisher and Advocate for Woman's Rights." Copied from the Historical Files maintained by the National Park Service. The Social Welfare History Project, <http://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/biography/bloomer-amelia/> (accessed by M. Waters, 11-1-2016); Lori D. Ginzberg, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: An American Life* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009); Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).