

## **What Ever Happened to... Charge Conference Trials**

One strength of early Methodism was the mutual accountability built into class meetings and congregational life, with provision in the Discipline for church trials of those thought to have broken the rules. The Quarterly Conference, which was to be held by the presiding elder [now named the district superintendent] four times a year on each charge, was the venue for handling the spiritual and temporal business of the charge – including any necessary examinations, complaints or trials.

The early Quarterly Conference minute books for most charges include accusations, hearings, and judgments involving offenses committed by members of the congregation. By today's standards, most of the infractions were very minor and involved conduct (buying or selling on the Sabbath, using oaths and/or unnecessarily harsh or vulgar language, etc.) or doctrine (proclaiming there is no literal hell, espousing evolution, etc.). But the minute books reveal the seriousness with which these violations were approached and the amount of time and energy they demanded from the presiding elder, the preacher in charge (i.e., the appointed itinerant), and the members of the congregation called upon to be the committees that rendered the decisions.

One of the earliest Quarterly Conference minute books in the conference archives is from the Pittston Circuit and begins September 3, 1831. As the Wyoming Conference was not formed until 1852, the Pittston Circuit was then a part of the Susquehanna District of the Oneida Conference. This article presents two extended passages from that minute book. The passages are presented verbatim, corrected only for spelling and some grammar, with explanatory endnotes given on the final page.

The first passage is from the Third Quarterly Conference of the 1834-35 conference year, which was held in Centerville (an old name for Providence) by presiding elder George Lane. It involves two separate single paragraph trials for infractions that are not fully identified and is very typical of early Methodism.

The second passage of several pages is from the second Quarterly Conference of the 1840-41 conference year, which was held in Providence (now within the northern part of Scranton) in the absence of the presiding elder by the preacher in charge – with a short sequel from the third Quarterly Conference of that year, which was held in Abington Centre (now Waverly) by presiding elder David Holmes.

It involves a trial so fascinating and so complex that the following outline of the basic story line is given to aid the reader.

1. In 1839, Mrs. Elisabeth Williams moved from Providence to Wilkes-Barre and left a large mirror with Mrs. Anna Steward. Mrs. Steward claims she purchased the mirror, while Mrs. Williams claims it was only on loan for safe keeping.
2. In 1840, Mrs. Williams returned to Providence and attempted to retrieve the mirror. Mrs. Steward accused Mrs. Williams of falsehood and asked for a church trial –

which ruled that this was an honest misunderstanding and that Mrs. Williams did not deliberately lie.

3. In 1841, Mrs. Steward appealed the decision and asked for a new trial. Mrs. Williams claimed that by Discipline the claimant in such trials cannot appeal the decision. The preacher in charge agreed with that claim, dismissed the appeal of Mrs. Steward, and then filed his own appeal.

4. The new trial [whose minutes are given in this article] went over the entire body of evidence, made further inquiries, and determined that Mrs. Williams was guilty as charged.

5. Mrs. Williams then appealed the reversal of the decision [in a letter given in this article], but her appeal was denied.

### **1. Quarterly Conference minutes: August 1, 1835**

The trial of William Lewis being brought before the conference, it was moved and seconded and carried

- that the said William Lewis make a suitable satisfactory acknowledgement to the church and remunerations to the persons who have sustained loss on or before the 28<sup>th</sup> of August
- that he be restored to his former standing as a local preacher
- and if he refuse to make such satisfaction and remuneration that he shall be expelled from the church

signed by the president and members of the conference (see file of minutes)

The trial of Newton Smith Jr<sup>1</sup> next came before the conference, the preacher in charge having read the charges and specifications. Mr. Smith, present, objected to the legality of his former trial by the class and the correctness of the minutes of the testimony of said trial. It was moved and seconded and carried

- that Newton Smith have a new trial by a committee.

The conference was of the opinion that the minutes above referred to were correct. After further consideration it was moved and seconded and carried

- that Mr. Smith make suitable acknowledgement of improper conduct before the quarterly conference and promise in the future to be more watchful and careful.

Mr. Smith being called before the conference made the above acknowledgement and was restored to his former standing.

### **2. Quarterly Conference minutes: January 16, 1841**

Question: Are there any appeals?

Answer: Yes.

Ann M. Steward versus Elisabeth Williams – from the award of Jacob Silkman<sup>2</sup>, William C. Robinson and Aaron Gregory, the committee before whom

she was cited to appear on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of November 1840 (D. Holmes<sup>3</sup> presiding) to answer to charges and specifications preferred against her and tried March 30<sup>th</sup> 1840, an appeal taken therefrom to the quarterly conference and on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of June 1840 by said conference remanded back for a new trial.

December 25<sup>th</sup> 1840 – an appeal by the complainant was ordered to be entered in the journal of this conference and notice to be given Elisabeth Williams to answer said appeal on Saturday the 10<sup>th</sup> January 1841 at Providence.

December 26<sup>th</sup> 1840 – verbal notice was given Elisabeth Williams to appear and answer the appeal on the 10<sup>th</sup> January 1841 by me, W. Silkman.<sup>4</sup> Notice accepted.

December 29<sup>th</sup> 1840 – Elisabeth Williams the defendant takes the following exceptions, to wit

- that the Discipline makes no provision for an appeal on motion of the complainant
- that the entertaining of an appeal on said motion is subversive of her right as a member of the M.E. Church

January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1841 – the appeal of said A.M. Steward is withdrawn by order of Benjamin Ellis<sup>5</sup>, preacher in charge, per A. Miller.

January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1841 – Benjamin Ellis, as preacher in charge, appeals from the awards of Jacob Silkman, William C. Robinson and Aaron Gregory in the above case and through Artemas Miller<sup>6</sup> orders an appeal in his name to be entered in the journal of this conference and notice, and notice thereof to be given the defendant.

January 12<sup>th</sup> 1841 – notice was given the defendant of the appeal.

January 16<sup>th</sup> 1841 – 2<sup>nd</sup> quarterly conference was held at the school house in Providence. The following minutes were presented, taken at the second trial of Ann M. Steward vs. E. Williams, upon the following notice (the defendant's counsel was sick; D.F. Reed<sup>7</sup> officiated):

*To Elisabeth Williams:*

*You are hereby notified to appear before me the undersigned at the house of J. Drake in Providence on Friday the 6<sup>th</sup> of November next at 1 o'clock P.M. to answer a charge and specification preferred against you by Ann M. Steward (which is hereunto attached) for a violation of the rules and discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which charge was tried on the 30<sup>th</sup> day of March 1840 and an appeal taken from the awards of the committee to the quarterly conference and by said conference remanded back for a new trial.*

*The committee before whom you will be tried are Jacob Silkman, Aaron Gregory and William C. Robinson. If any exceptions are to be taken to any said persons, notice must be immediately given to B. Ellis in order that the vacancy may be filled.*

*D. Holmes, Jr. Presiding Elder*

*Methodist Episcopal Church vs. Elisabeth Williams – Charge*

*I. Falsehood in selling Ann M. Steward a looking glass and denying said sale.*

*II. Falsehood in denying the sale of a looking glass to Ann M. Steward by saying it was only lent. Sale of the looking glass was on or about 1<sup>st</sup> of April 1839.*

This notice was served on the defendant 5 November 1840, 12:00.

(Minutes of trial)

Methodist Episcopal Church on the complaint of A.M. Steward versus Elisabeth Williams.

November 6, 1840

D. Holmes. President

William Silkman, Secretary

Jacob Silkman

Aaron Gregory

William C. Robinson, Committee present

Sophia N. Blois<sup>8</sup> (for complainant) says that on or about the last of September or the first of October 1839, sister Williams came to the house of witness A.M. Steward visiting in the same house when the following conversation took place. Mrs. Williams told Mrs. Steward that she had to buy back that large glass. Mrs. Steward said that she did not like to let the glass go. She had let her mother have her small one, and if she let that go she should have none. Mrs. Williams said, "You know you was to have given me \$2.00 in money for the glass." Mrs. Steward said, "Did you not say the shoes – the shoes would answer you as well as the money." Mrs. Williams said so: "I did, for Abraham could not get any that would fit me at the store." Mrs. Steward said, "If you had made any reserve of the glass, or said that should you want it again – if you came back I would have given it up." Mrs. Williams said, "I never affected to come back again to this place to live when I went away. I would not care so much about it, but I had it of a particular friend and I do not like to part with it on that account." Mrs. Steward said, "You should have thought of it when you sold it. I did not buy the glass to sell it again." Mrs. Williams said, "Do as you would be done by." Mrs. Steward said, "I do. If I had sold any thing and got my pay, I should not think to get it back again."

Cross examined: Says the conversation referred to between Mrs. Williams and Mrs. Steward was after they (Williams and wife) came back from the borough of Wilkes-Barre to live. Heard Mrs. Steward say she bought a small looking glass of Mrs. Williams when she lived in the house with her. Saw the glass; should not think it was as large as the one before us. Did not tell any stipulated price; should think she said she saved to the amount of it. This was as much as 2 weeks after the 15<sup>th</sup> May 1839. Mrs. Steward said that Mrs. Williams left some things with her, and Mrs. Williams and a boy came several times and took things away after they moved back. Thinks she has heard Mrs. Steward say they had received a letter from Mrs. Williams stating they were going to the west or would like to go with Brother Courtwright. Mrs. Williams said, "I will pay you the \$2 in money again." Mrs. Steward said, "I would rather have the glass than the money." Mrs. Williams was in the house something near an hour and was not all the while

talking about the glass. Could not recollect all the conversation. Did not then expect to be called in question about it. Mrs. Williams was in the house about an hour at the time this conversation took place; it was longer before than after it took place than that she stayed. Has heard Steward and his wife talk about the glass in the summer, and Steward told his wife that Mrs. Williams said she meant to have the glass if she came back again. Mrs. Steward said she should not let it go.

Hannah VanStork (for complainant) says she never heard any talk between the parties. Mrs. Williams came into her house the last of April or the first of May 1839 and wanted to sell some articles – two in particular: a pair of tongs at \$2, and an iron basin for 4 bits. The basin the witness got for 50 cents. She then asked the witness if she did not want to buy her large looking glass. The witness told her she did not want to buy her glass because she had promised it to Mrs. Steward. She said, “You had better say you will have it, for I do not think Mrs. Steward can. The witness declined taking it until Mrs. Steward gave the bargain up. If she did, she would at that price. Went over to the tan house on Steward’s place in the afternoon and took the money to pay for the basin. Took a jar used for a churn, which Mrs. Williams lent her through the summer, and Mrs. Williams gave her a present of 6 crane hooks and told her she need not let Steward’s people know any thing about it. Said, “They might think that I might have given them to them, but I think the glass piece [they] will pay [for] accordingly.”

Cross examined: Knows nothing about Steward’s people boarding Mrs. Williams. They moved in with them in April. They lived before in the house where Mamma Nora lives. Saw Williams and his wife at the table once or twice. The glass is in a giant frame, some fractured and [unclear].

John Drake (for defendant) has heard Mrs. Williams deny the sale of a looking glass to Mrs. Steward before the original complaint was pressed. Mrs. Williams gave the witness two dollars to get the glass. There was due Mrs. Steward \$2 if the glass was given up. She (Mrs. Steward) said that, and to pay that the \$2 was handed him by Mrs. Williams. She (Mrs. Williams) said she left the glass with them and gave this money rather than have them claim any demand by way of offset for the glass.

Cross examined: Has had conversation with Mr. Steward. He said when he got possession of the glass was when they lived where Mamma now lives. She (Mrs. Williams) let him have it to carry down and said they must take good care of it for her. He took it down and hung it up in his house. This conversation took place after Mrs. Williams moved back from Wilkes-Barre. From all the conversations the witness had had with the defendant, the witness believes she thought it was left in the Steward’s care.

By order of the president, this trial is adjourned to Friday 13<sup>th</sup> November at 1 o’clock P.M.

On the day 13<sup>th</sup> November the parties met pursuant to adjournment.

D. Holmes. President

William Silkman, Secretary

Jacob Silkman

Aaron Gregory

William C. Robinson

Mrs. Drake (for defendant): Mrs. Blois and Mrs. Steward came to her and said that Brother Ellis told them to go to Mrs. Williams and make friends. They went and the witness told Mrs. Williams that Mrs. Steward had come to make friends or settle. Mrs. Williams replied that she had not started it and had nothing to settle – but had she known she (Ann Steward) would have treated her so, she would have handled her without mittens.

Cross examined: She has heard Mrs. Williams deny selling the glass.

Sweet Garner (for defendant) commenced boarding with defendant 1 November 1838 and continuous here to April 1 1839. Cannot recollect the particulars to questions asked by the defendant.

Cross examined: Mr. Williams was sick while witness boarded there. Mr. Steward took care of her two or three days. It was after this that Mrs. Steward was there. Most, they pretended to be very intimate, were together a great deal. She was at Williams' a great deal. Cannot tell how long she boarded there. Mrs. Steward was afterward gone to Green Field considerable.

Charles Hains (for defendant) says he came up with Mrs. Williams from the borough – lived with them three months. While he lived there Mr. Steward came to this house and said he would be willing to bring home the glass, but Mrs. Steward was not willing. Mr. Steward also said that Mrs. Williams should not have the glass.

Abraham Williams was called for the defense and objected to by the claimant's counsel on account of his relationship as husband – which was objected to as insufficient [reason to deny his testimony]. The president ruled his testimony inadmissible.

The minutes of the former trial were called for by the defendant and read in evidence to show a different statement made by Mrs. Blois at the former trial from the one now made. The minutes were admitted to be a correct statement of her testimony at the former trial as far as they went by both parties.

Martha Jane Slocum<sup>9</sup> (for the defendant) said she went into Mrs. Steward's after Mrs. Williams moved to Wilkes-Barre and saw a glass hung up. She asked Mrs. Steward if she had got a new glass. She said, "Not exactly. It is Mrs. Williams'. She left it when she went to Wilkes-Barre." The witness said it is Mrs. Williams' and Mrs. Steward said, "I expect she will have it when she comes, likely, I guess." It was a yellow frame – looked like gold. Cannot tell how long ago it was – it was while they (the Stewards) lived with Blois.

Cross examined: Says she mentioned this circumstance to Mrs. White, who was on a visit to her house this afternoon, and that Mrs. Williams came after her and requested her to come down to the trial. She told Mrs. White she did not wish to interfere with the affair. Cannot tell how many years ago it was, but knows it was while the Steward's people lived in the house with Blois. Did not see Mrs. Blois – thinks she might have been in the adjoining room. They did not live with Blois until after Mrs. Williams went to Wilkes-Barre to live. Has always lived in Providence and cannot be mistaken about this.

Testimony closed, and after some remarks by the respective parties and a brief charge by the president D. Holmes to the committee, they retired and brought in the following award. To wit: "This is to certify that it is our opinion the glass was really sold, but we think the parties have misunderstood each other and we are not prepared to say that Sister Williams has willfully been guilty of falsehood."

Jacob Silkman  
William C. Robinson  
Aaron Gregory

After reading the minutes, the above named committee were called in to explain their views in reference to the guilt of the accused – and their views in giving the award.

D.F. Reed (for the defendant) proposed to read a letter from George Peck,<sup>10</sup> to whom the points had been submitted, which was objected to by S. Griffin and ruled out.

After remarks by members of the conference, a vote was taken on the subject and it was resolved that in further consideration of the case of Elisabeth Williams that the conference consider Elisabeth Williams guilty of the charge preferred by Ann M. Steward.

By request of the chair, the conference expressed what they consider should be the penalty. Resolved that Elisabeth Williams be required to make a public acknowledgement to the church.

### **Quarterly Conference minutes: March 13, 1841**

Is there any other business before the conference? Yes.

Elizabeth Williams presents a petition praying for a new trial on account of an alleged want of jurisdiction and that she is now in possession of new evidence which she was unable to present in a former trial, in the following language. To wit:

To the Quarterly Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Pittston Circuit, Oneida Conference,

The undersigned respectfully begs leave to represent that Ann M. Steward, a member of the aforesaid Church and Circuit, having preferred a complaint against the undersigned which has been tried before a committee, an appeal taken by the defendant to the Quarterly Conference, remanded back for a new trial which has subsequently been before a committee of members, and by said committee acquitted of the charges and specifications preferred against her, as by reference thereunto will more fully appear.

From which award Ann M. Steward appealed, and subsequently Benjamin Ellis preacher in charge of said Circuit entered or caused in his name to be entered on the journals of said circuit an appellant, and afterward to wit on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January last at a Quarterly Meeting held in Providence in the absence of the presiding elder did convene a Quarterly Conference, procure the journal and records of and pertaining to the trial, sit as president on his own appeal and advocate for the complainant, a small minority only of the members of said Conference being present, a majority of whom in their wisdom reversed the decision of the last named committee and caused the same to be entered in the records of the Circuit prejudicial to her interest and the cause of truth and justice, against which proceedings had on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January and subsequently the undersigned respectfully protests and remonstrates as being without warrant and in violation of the letter and spirit of the Methodist Episcopal Discipline.

For which reason and in consideration that the undersigned is now in possession of evidence which in a former trial was unknown to her and others who it were not in her power to procure, by whom she believes she will be able to prove to the satisfaction of every unbiased mind that the charges are untrue and unfounded.

In fact the undersigned therefore prays that a new trial may be granted her and that the appeal may be laid over until next Quarterly Conference and privilege granted to introduce new evidence and procure depositions from evidence residing out of the state, or at a distance so great as to render it inconvenient to attend, the appellant being privileged to enter interrogations to the questions propounded in the depositions, and that Abraham Williams' evidence which was rejected in the former trial before the committee on account of the relationship he sustained to the defendant be allowed to appear and testify to what he knows in relation to the matter in dispute.

March 13, 1841 Elisabeth Williams

After reading the petition of said Mrs. Williams and the remarks of the members of the Conference, on motion made and seconded it was resolved

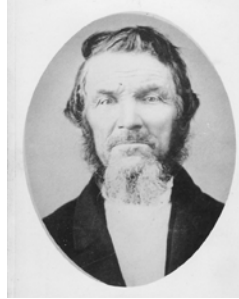
- that the proceedings of the last Quarterly Conference be not reconsidered so far as it relates to the trial of Elisabeth Williams

A motion made and seconded that Elisabeth Williams be granted a new trial on account of her inability to procure evidence in the former trial was put and lost.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Newton Smith Jr. (5/10/1806 – 3/26/1888) was born in Wyoming County PA and died in Boone County IA. He and his wife, the former Permelia Atchinson, a native of Monroe County NY, raised seven children and are buried in Grand Ridge Cemetery, Boone IA. He served as a local pastor. His father Newton Smith, originally from Connecticut, and his older brother Reeder Smith, who eventually settled in Michigan, were also Methodist local preachers.



Rev. Newton Smith  
(1806 – 1888)



Mrs. Permelia Smith  
(1814-1892)

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Silkman (1784-1865) was born in Cross River NY and moved to Providence in 1839. He was a carpenter and involved himself in the lumber business. He is buried in the Forest Hill Cemetery, Dunmore PA.

<sup>3</sup> David Holmes Jr. (1810-1873) was presiding elder of the Susquehanna District 1840-41. His area service to the church also included a pastorate in Wilkes-Barre and election as a delegate to General Conference. He later moved west, where he itinerated and headed various Methodist educational institutions. His obituary appears in the 1874 Northwest Indiana Conference journal.

<sup>4</sup> William Silkman (1807-1874) and his wife were among the 9 founding member of the Methodist class at Providence in 1829. He was a nephew to Jacob Silkman and is buried in the Dunmore Cemetery, Dunmore PA.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. Benjamin Ellis (1791-1871) served the Pittston charge 1839-41. Admitted to the Oneida Conference in 1829, he became a charter member of the Wyoming Conference at its formation in 1852. His obituary appears in the 1872 Wyoming Conference journal.

<sup>6</sup> Artemas Miller and his wife were among the 9 founding members of the Methodist class at Providence in 1829.

<sup>7</sup> Dayton F. Reed (1817-1860) was approved at the next Quarterly Conference, June 18, 1841, for recommendation to the Oneida Annual Conference for admission as a traveling preacher. He was so admitted and went on to serve in New York and New Jersey. His obituary appears in the 1861 Newark Conference journal.

<sup>8</sup> Sophia [nee Polley] Blois (1819-1873) was the wife of Providence physician Dr. Hiram Blois (1798-1890). They are buried in the Hamlin Cemetery in Hamlin PA.

<sup>9</sup> Martha Jane Slocum (1824-1873) at the time of the trial was single and still in her teens. She was the daughter of Sidney Slocum and the granddaughter of Ebenezer Slocum, founder of Slocum Hollow (now known as the city of Scranton PA) 1843 she would marry a Mr. James Hopkins Kays (1818-1894)

<sup>10</sup> George Peck (1797-1876) was the presiding elder of the Susquehanna District 1839-40 and was now living in New York City. Apparently his knowledge of the people involved and/or the particulars of the situation as it was unfolding during his time in the District was such that Mrs. Williams sought to introduce a statement by him – which might have carried significant weight. One of the five noted Peck brothers to serve in the Methodist Episcopal ministry, he later served as editor of the Methodist Quarterly Review (1840-48) and The Christian Advocate (1848-52). His obituary appears in the 1877 Wyoming Conference journal.