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## History Happened Here: Mary Powell — an activist and teacher

By Andrew Amelinckx  
Hudson-Catskill Newspapers

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Elizabeth Powell Bond was an activist and teacher. (Contributed photo)

GHENT — John Brown swung from the end of a rope, a criminal to some, a martyr to others. He and a small band of men, both Caucasian and African-American, had, on Oct. 16, 1859, taken a federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, then a part of Virginia, by force. Brown and his band hoped to instigate a slave revolt, but instead were quickly taken into custody by federal troops under Robert E. Lee, then a colonel in the U.S. Army.

On the day Brown was hanged, Dec. 2, a large group of supporters gathered in Ghent on that stormy Friday evening to honor his memory, to continue to push for the abolition of slavery throughout the country and to ask the state government to repudiate the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.

At the second meeting, held two weeks later, 18-year-old Elizabeth Powell (1841 to 1926) spoke on the subject of abolition. Powell was a Quaker from Ghent who throughout her long life fought for the rights of both African-Americans and women and was also a peace activist.

Born in Clinton, Dutchess County, in 1841, she came from old Nantucket stock on her mother's side. Her parents, Townsend and Catharine Macy Powell, were also members of the Society of Friends. Her father was a civic-minded farmer interested in the agricultural sciences.

The Powell children grew up with progressive attitudes and held to the belief that all were created equal. Elizabeth's brother, Aaron Macy Powell, who also spoke at that Abolitionist meeting in Ghent, worked for the anti-slavery movement, beginning in 1852, as a lecturer. He would also edit a number of Abolitionist and Temperance newspapers.

Her other brother, George T. Powell, would follow in his father's footsteps, farming and studying agronomy, eventually becoming the director of the Agricultural Institute of the state of New York, as well as editing farm news for the Chatham Courier.

Elizabeth Powell, who moved with her family to Ghent from Clinton in 1845, was a smart and dedicated student who by age 15 was an assistant at the Friends' School in Dutchess County and would graduate two years later. She also attended Claverack Institute before beginning to teach in several public schools in the area. In the early 1860s she began a boarding school out of her parent's home in Ghent that included both African-American and Catholic students, something that was unusual enough to garner mention 30 years later in a brief biography of her.

The social issues of this time period often saw a lot of overlap, with those involved in Abolition also working for women's rights and the Temperance Movement. This was true of Elizabeth Powell, who was involved in all three and in regard to the Temperance Movement was known to personally plead with drunks to change their ways.

She was also interested in physical fitness and studied with Dr. Dio Lewis, a Temperance leader who practiced homeopathic medicine and was a physical fitness advocate.

In 1865 Elizabeth Powell became the first gymnastics teacher at Vassar College in

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Poughkeepsie. She would later head up the Free Congregational Sunday-school in Florence, Massachusetts. It was in Florence where she met her soon-to-be husband, Henry Herrick Bond, a local attorney. He was not a Quaker.

The couple were married in 1872 in Ghent. Six years Elizabeth's junior, Henry had been the pitcher for an early Massachusetts baseball team formed just after the Civil War, the Eagles Baseball Club. He was a graduate of Columbia Law School, practiced law with his brother and also briefly edited a local paper, the Northampton Journal, with the assistance of his wife.

Elizabeth's passion for education continued after her marriage. She soon took on the trusteeship of the Florence Kindergarten and wrote on the subject of education. Her husband's health began to steadily decline and the couple traveled south for three years hoping to better his constitution, a common practice, but to no avail. He died in Virginia in 1881. They had two sons, Herrick Tyler Bond, who died while still an infant and Edwin Powell Bond, who went into business after graduating from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. His mother had been named in 1886 to the position of matron of the college, a title changed to dean five years later, making Elizabeth Powell Bond one of the first women in America to hold this type of position, a post she kept for 20 years.

While at Swarthmore she "infused into the social relations of the college those elements of sweetness and light which have done so much to realize Swarthmore's ideal of 'a college life in a home setting,'" according to a 1914 history of Delaware County, Pennsylvania.

She was friends with the major names in the social justice circle, from Susan B. Anthony to William Lloyd Garrison.

During her tenure at Swarthmore and after her retirement she continued to advocate for women's rights, equal treatment of African-Americans and for world peace. In 1907 she opened the National Peace Conference in New York, calling the event a "high-water mark" for civilization. Even while she advocated for peace, a decade after the conference — still fighting for the rights of others — she lauded the African-American soldiers fighting in the trenches across the Atlantic during World War I.

"There has been but one voice concerning the loyalty and the bravery of the colored troops," she wrote. "It is a pleasure to give them hearty assurance of our appreciation of their unselfish service. It would be unpardonable in us to come short of the spirit they have shown throughout the war."

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