

Pearson [or Pierson], Emily Catherine Clemons ["Clemens" or "Clemmons"] (1817–1900)

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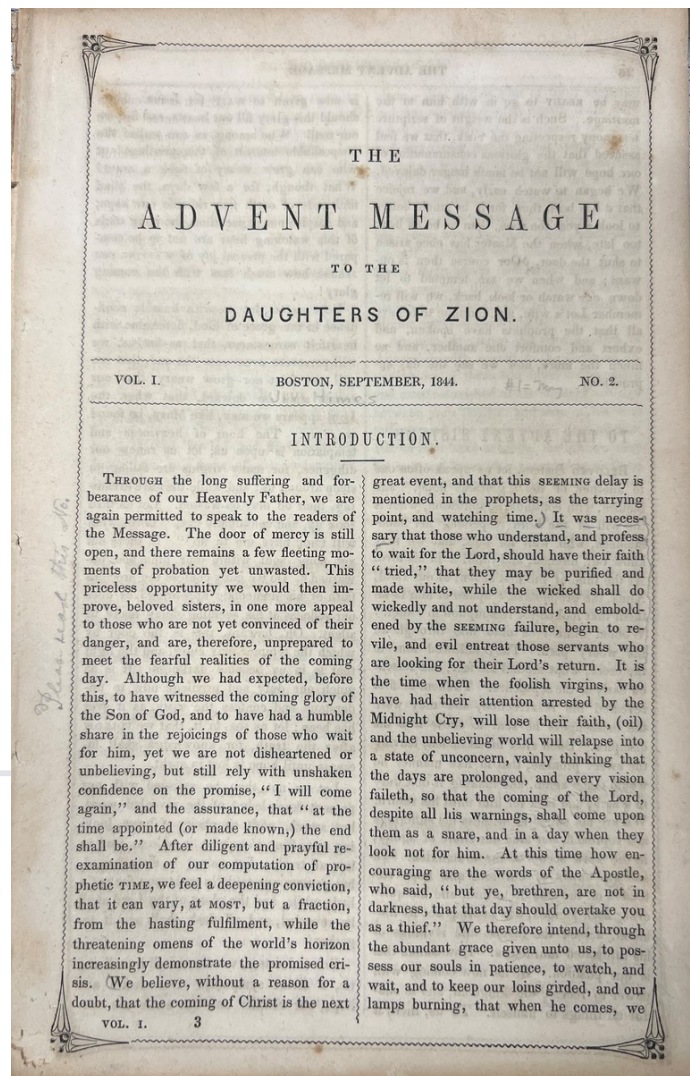


Photo courtesy of Michael W. Campbell (from Jim Nic collection).

Emily Catherine Clemons was an educator, author, poet, and from 1844 to 1845 a Millerite "laborer" exhorting people to be ready for Christ's impending return.¹ She later continued her writing career as an abolitionist novelist and advocate for temperance, missions, Sunday School, and other reforms. She was the author of at least 30 hymns.

Early Life

Emily Catherine Clemons was born July 28, 1817, in North Granby, Hartford, Connecticut, to Allen Clemons (1793-1868) and Catherine Helen Stillman (1796-1856).² He reportedly founded the Granby Social Literary Society and Lending Library in 1812. Catherine was baptized after her first birthday in the Granby First Congregational Church on September 27, 1818.³ She was the second of twelve children raised at the family

home, still extant at 130 Lost Acres Road in Granby, Connecticut, according to the local historical society. She may have included herself as a character that she described as “a young lady” from “a village academy in Connecticut” who had “a thirst of knowledge,” in one of her novels.⁴ The young lady in the story “commenced the study of Latin” to the surprise of her peers and went South to Virginia to visit relatives. Clemons herself went South, historians estimate, as early as 1833, at age 15. From 1837 to 1838, she attended Mount Holyoke during its inaugural year but did not officially graduate. Subsequently, she was sent to work as a tutor on a slave-holding plantation in Virginia to settle debts from her grandfather’s estate after the Panic of 1837-1838.⁵ Her maternal grandfather had been the first president of Yale. By January 1842, Clemons worked as a governess at Mount Airy, a plantation near Warsaw, Virginia.⁶

Millerite

In 1843 Clemons moved to Rochester, New York, where she became “principal of the young ladies’ department of Rochester Collegiate Institute.” In a note published in the *Advent Herald*, Emily Clemons was described as:

our estimable and pious sister of the Presbyterian Church in Rochester, N.Y., who has the charge of the Ladies High School in that place. She now attends the Adventist meeting, and is devoting what time she can get from the arduous duties of her school, to the spread of the Advent doctrine.⁷

In May 1844, Clemons joined Clorinda S. Minor (1806-1855) in publishing the *Advent Message to the Daughters of Zion*, a Millerite periodical directed at encouraging women in their faith that Christ would soon return. She spoke of the need to heed the simple, humble, and self-educated William Miller and to keep the faith of Jesus. She and Minor urged their “beloved countrywomen” to “be wise for ourselves” rather than shunning the Millerite movement because of widespread prejudice.⁸ Millerite Sarah J. Higgins described Clemons as an “excellent sister.”⁹

The Second Great Awakening (an American religious revival movement) provided a space for women to publicly proclaiming the gospel. Such activism and participation by women continued into the Millerite revival!¹⁰

Unfortunately, despite Clemon’s prolific writings and public speaking, her contributions have been largely overlooked by historians of Millerism. Some historians have wrongly associated her with other female visionaries, such as Dorinda Baker (1817-1865) and Ellen Harmon (1827-1915).¹¹ She should be recognized as one of the most active “lecturers” (preachers) within the movement. She wrote hundreds of articles and poems, often simply signed with her initials (E.C.C.), making it easy to overlook her contributions.¹² Brekus found that “No woman was more successful at promoting her beliefs than Emily Clemons . . . Clemons quickly became one of the most visible and respected women in the movement.”¹³

In July 1844, Clemons was listed with two other “female laborers”¹⁴ preaching at a Rochester, New York, camp meeting. As Adventist historian LeRoy Edwin Froom observed, she was one of a number of women preachers

who “formed part of the rather remarkable list of public heralds of the second advent.”¹⁵ She also advocated on behalf of the downtrodden slaves.¹⁶ This “champion of the cross” contributed to a general awakening as those who were “backsliders” were “reclaimed” as they listened to her preach.¹⁷ She accepted the “seventh-month” message of Christ’s return on October 22, 1844, at an Exeter, New Hampshire, camp meeting. She described her evangelistic efforts at home:

I have been in North Granby, Conn., with none to sympathise fully in my views. As I was supplied with publications, I went among those in the vicinity of my father’s residence—gave them books and papers, and told them that the Lord was speedily coming. I often expressed my conviction that the Advent would be in Oct., but had not strong faith enough to make this prominent.¹⁸

By October 1, 1844, Clemons went to Boston to fellowship with fellow Advent believers. She believed in the message of the “true Midnight Cry” as the work of God. The conversion of sinners was a fruit proving that God’s Spirit attended the movement. After the spring disappointment, “I resolved that I would not fix on another time. But when this last cry came proving the Spirit of it, I found it to be of God, so my worldly-wise resolution gave way before it; for I must follow the voice of the Great Shepherd.”¹⁹ She furthermore believed the “prophetic numbers extended to this autumn.” They “point to the tenth day of the seventh month of the Jewish year as the time of his Advent. On this day I expect to behold my blessed Savior.”²⁰ In a letter by Clemons to Miller, dated October 10, she reports that after Miller’s letter was publicly read in the Boston Tabernacle, the work in Boston was rapidly advancing. She added that the press was running day and night, and that each evening, the Adventist Tabernacle in Boston was crowded.²¹ In a postscript written by Himes to Miller, he added that he had accepted the October 22 date for Christ’s return.²² This postscript indicates that Clemons played a crucial role in promoting the October 22 date, convincing Himes of the date who in turn encouraged Miller to accept it.

Bridegroom Adventist (1845)

After the Great Disappointment, on February 10, 1845, Clemons wrote to William Miller expressing her continued “confidence” that “the Bridegroom” would still come.²³ She furthermore believed that “*some event* has transpired equal or equivalent to that which our faith anticipated.”²⁴ She clung to her faith even though she would be opposed by Samuel S. Snow who now spurned the idea that “the atonement was *commenced* by our Lord on the 10th day of the 7th month.”²⁵ She clung to her faith and believed the parable of the Bridegroom remained applicable to their situation:

But some of the dear Brn. & sisters say it cannot be so for we did not see the ceremony—they seem to forget that they are to act the part of virgins in an oriental wedding & that their place is to wait in the apartment adjoining the bridal chamber with lamps trimmed & burning until the Bridegroom knocks and ushers them into the Marriage Supper. We are to wait for our Lord when he shall *return* from the wedding.²⁶

By March 1845 Clemons moved to Portland, Maine, where she edited *Hope Within the Veil*²⁷ and co-edited *The Hope of Israel*. While no copies are known to exist of the *Hope Within the Veil*²⁸ and there are only three issues of *The Hope of Israel*, both periodicals were important vehicles for communication among those Bridegroom Adventists who clung to their faith after the Great Disappointment. On March 20, 1845, she announced this was the year of jubilee during which the “marriage of the Lamb is come.”²⁹ She viewed it as the “time of restitution of all things spoken by all the holy prophets is just being ushered in.”³⁰ They were furthermore entering “the time of refreshing” when the “sins of the whole house of Israel” were being “blotted out.”³¹ She tenaciously held on to her belief in Christ’s return and expressed an early form of what became the Seventh-day Adventists’ sanctuary doctrine in these passages.

The April 17, 1845 issue of *The Hope of Israel* listed her as co-editor with Charles H. Pearson (1824-1906). Charles was the son of the “Father [John] Pearson” (1788-1878), who owned a bakery, was a noted abolitionist in Portland, Maine and also witnessed Ellen White’s third vision.³² Charles and his brother, John Jr. (1813-1900), are additionally notable because they published William Foy’s (1818-1893) visions in pamphlet form.³³ This pamphlet was published three years after Foy’s visions and actually occurred as part of a flurry of print activity in early 1845.³⁴ Clemons was among the earliest to reinterpret the events of October 22, 1844 as part of a two-phase ministry of Christ in the heavenly Sanctuary. Instead of Christ coming on October 22, 1844, she thought his ministry had shifted to the most holy place in heaven.³⁵ She reportedly shared this new understanding of the sanctuary in her periodical *Hope Within the Veil*.³⁶ This teaching was remarkably similar to the one taught by Hiram Edson, O. R. L. Crosier, and Dr. F. B. Hahn, about the ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary. Despite their eventual departure from the groups that emerged from the Millerite Movement, as Merlin D. Burt, director of the Ellen G. White Estate, argues Clemons and Crosier “became the most important published promoters of the extended-atonement view during 1845.”³⁷

During September 1845, Clemons moved away from her Adventist views. James White noted this shift, writing that John and Charles Pearson and Clemons were “doing all they can to drag others to outer darkness.”³⁸ When Charles Pearson and Clemons announced their engagement, James White stated that by their getting married that this was tantamount to their abandoning their belief in Christ’s soon return. He added: “We all look upon it [their getting married] as a wile of the Devil.”³⁹ Eventually he changed his mind as he and Ellen Harmon wedded less than a year later on August 30, 1846.

Family Life and Later Writings

Clemons married Charles Henry Pearson (1824-1906) in Portland, Maine, on September 23, 1845. They soon afterward co-founded another periodical titled *The Bible Advocate*. They had seven children together: Helen (b. 1848), Catharine (b. 1849), Frances (b. 1853), Allen (b. 1854), Henry (b. 1858), Caroline (b. 1861), and Isabelle (b. 1864).

In February 1851, Clemons published *Jamie Parker, The Fugitive* (copyrighted by Charles Henry Pierson⁴⁰), in which she claimed the “materials” were “gathered during a residence at the South.” Clemons, who followed the stories of black people, traced the story of Jamie Parker, a fugitive slave who escaped into Canada. This book was published only a year after the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and the year before Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) serialized *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (June 1851 through April 1852). In 1853 she published *Cousin Franck’s Household* under the pseudonym Pocahontas (and later republished as *Ruth Sacrifice* in 1863).

The couple spent some time in Le Roy, Minnesota, where their son Henry was born. Their frontier experience was chronicled by Pearson in *On the Frontier* (1864). During the Civil War, Clemons wrote an unfinished serial for the abolitionist periodical, *The Liberator*, titled “Plantation Pictures” (October 1863 through March 1864). She also published *The Poor White, or the Rebel Conscript* (1864) and *Prince Paul, the Freedman Soldier* (1867)—her final abolitionist work, an updated version of *Jamie Parker*.⁴¹ Some of her later publications focused on the temperance movement: *Echo-bank; A Temperance Tale* (1868), *Lydia* (1879), and *Madonna Hall* (1890). Her books often espoused moralistic themes. She wrote a historical romance titled *Gutenberg* (1870) on the father of modern printing. She wrote numerous short stories and poems and helped found the Boston Young Women’s Christian Association and the Woman’s Board of Foreign Missions (affiliated with the Congregationalists).

During the last decade of her life, Clemons sometimes used the *nom de plume* Finnemore—she used a variety of names to anonymize her writings. At least thirty hymns that she wrote are still included in hymnals.⁴² She was especially active in the Women’s Christian Temperance Union.⁴³ As an avid reformer, she was during her later years a Baptist.⁴⁴ She also remained an ardent believer in Christ’s soon return. “Many prophecies and signs converge in this period so that all who will, may know the near approach of our long expected King,” she wrote in 1893.⁴⁵

At some point after 1850 Pearson became a minister, and by 1860 he was listed as a minister living in Seabrook, New Hampshire. The 1870 Census had them both living in Andover, Massachusetts, with Pearson listed as a physician for the first time. In the 1870s Pearson and Clemons separated and presumably divorced. In 1878 Pearson remarried Julia A. Hill (1830-1919). The 1880 Census lists Clemons as head of household in Andover, Massachusetts. At some point in the late 1880s, she moved to Boston. City directories list her as living there through the 1890s.

Clemons moved from Boston back to Medford, Massachusetts, in May 1899 where she resided at 90 Monument Street with her daughter Frances. In a letter in the last months of her life, she continued to express a special interest in evangelizing women. She argued for the retention of the Women’s Board as an independent entity rather than be absorbed in the male-run American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. In the letter, she still drew from her Millerite and Bridegroom Adventist background referencing the parable of the wise and foolish virgins.⁴⁶ She passed away from pneumonia on March 17, 1900, in West Medford.⁴⁷ She is buried in the Wildwood Cemetery in Winchester, Massachusetts.⁴⁸

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"Watchman, What of the Night?" *The Advent Herald, and Signs of the Times Reporter*, March 13, 1844, 41.

NOTES

1. With special thanks to Kevin L. Morgan, Kevin M. Burton, and Catherine E. Saunders for helpful comments that have strengthened this article.
2. Merlin Burt states that "we do not know her exact birth date," ("Emily C. Clemons and the Developing Sanctuary Doctrine During 1845" [Term paper, Andrews University, 1997], 2) but the U.S. Town and Vital Records Database lists her age at death being 82 years, 7 months, and 17 days. She died on March 17, 1900, which makes her date of birth as July 28, 1817. Some genealogists and her tombstone inadvertently date the year as 1818. If one uses larger units subtracted first, the date of birth could have been July 31, 1817.
3. <https://www.salmonbrookhistoricalsociety.com/emilyclemonspierson>, accessed March 10, 2024.
4. Cited in Catherine E. Saunders, "Emily Clemens Pearson, 1818-1900," *Legacy* 29, no. 2 (2012): 301.
5. The original sources are not clear what debts were incurred or why she might be held responsible for this familial debt. It seems likely since her maternal grandfather died in 1707 that possibly this was debt incurred from her paternal side of the family, but unfortunately extant sources do not clarify what may have happened.
6. Catherine E. Saunders, "Emily Clemens Pearson, 1818-1900," *Legacy* 29, no. 2 (2012): 301.
7. See prefatory note at introduction to article: Emily C. Clemens, "Redemption Nigh, Or Reasons for Believing the Savior Will Soon Return," *The Advent Herald, and Signs of the Times Reporter*, February 14, 1844, 4.
8. Clorinda S. Minor and Emily Clemons, "An Appeal to the Women of Our Beloved Country," *The Advent Message to the Daughters of Zion* 1.1 (May 1844): 1-2.
9. Cited by Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 319.
10. *Ibid.*, 318.
11. Ann Taves, "Visions," in *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet*, eds. Terrie Dopp Aamodt, Gary Land and Ronald L. Numbers (New York: Oxford, 2014), 40. Similarly Jonathan Butler (26) and Terrie Aamodt (124) make the same claim. The claim appears in an interview with Ron

Graybill and Fred Hoyt who asserted that she was one of several visionaries lumped together. No historical evidence substantiates this claim. See Rennie Schoepflin, "Scandal or Rite of Passage? Historians on the Dammon Trial," *Spectrum* (1987), 37-50. See references by Hoyt (39) and Graybill (45).

12. Ibid., 319.

13. Ibid., 324.

14. J. V. Himes, "Scottsville Camp Meeting, Near Rochester, N.Y.," *The Midnight Cry!* August 8, 1844, 30.

15. LeRoy Edwin Froom, *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1954), 4:706-707.

16. E. C. C[lemons], "A Voice from Slave Land," *The Advent Message to the Daughters of Zion*, September 1844, 35.

17. *Midnight Cry*, August 1, 1844, 22.

18. "Letter from E. C. Clemons," [October 7, 1844] *The Voice of Truth, and Glad Tidings of the Kingdom at Hand*, October 14, 1844, 158.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid. George R. Knight references this same source but incorrectly states that she was "Mrs. E. C. Clemons" but was not married until the following year. See Knight, *William Miller and the Rise of Adventism*, 174.

22. See Francis D. Nichol, *The Midnight Cry: A Defense of the Character and Conduct of William Miller and the Millerites, Who Mistakenly Believed That the Second Coming of Christ Would Take Place in the Year 1844* (Takoma Park, DC: Review and Herald, 1944), 230, fn. 8.

23. E. C. Clemons to William Miller, February 17, 1845.

24. Ibid.

25. [Samuel S. Snow], *The Book of Judgment Delivered to Israel by Elijah the Messenger of the Everlasting Covenant* (New York: G. Mitchell, 1848), 217.

26. E. C. Clemons to William Miller, February 17, 1845.

27. See note announcing the second and third issues of *Hope Within the Veil* in *The Day-Star*, July 15, 1845, 38.

28. "It breathes a good spirit" and advances the "preliminaries of the New Covenant," observed Enoch Jacobs. He also noted that that he had received numbers two and three of *Hope Within the Veil* suggesting at least three issues of this periodical were printed. See announcement in *The Day-Star*, July 15, 1845, 38.
29. Letter dated March 20, 1845. Emily C. Clemons, "Letter from Sister Clemons," *The Day-Star*, April 15, 1845, 34-35.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 1:64; idem., *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White Being a Narrative of Her Experience to 1881 as Written by Herself, with a Sketch of Her Subsequent Labors and of Her Last Sickness Compiled from Original Sources* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1915), 70-71.
33. William E. Foy, *The Christian Experience of William E. Foy Together with the Two Visions He Received in the Months of Jan. and Feb. 1842* (Portland: J. and C. H. Pearson, 1845).
34. For context, see Delbert W. Baker, *The Unknown Prophet: Before Ellen White, God Chose William Ellis Foy*, 2nd ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013).
35. Emily C. Clemons, "Letter from Sister Clemons," [Portland, Maine, March 20, 1845], *The Day-Star*, April 15, 1845, 34-35.
36. George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 64.
37. Merlin D. Burt, "The Extended Atonement View in the *Day-Dawn* and the Emergence of Sabbatarian Adventism," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 338.
38. See letter by James White, dated September 27, 1845, in *The Day-Star*, October 11, 1845, 47.
39. Ibid.
40. Emily Clemons spelled her married name typically as "Pearson." In this publication, both she and her husband have their names spelled as "Pierson." It is not known why, but she did use various spellings of her name and other pseudonyms, so perhaps this should not be surprising.
41. For background, see Jesse Alemán, "From Union Officers to Cuban Rebels: The Story of the Brothers Cavada and Their American Civil Wars," in *The Latino Nineteenth Century*, eds. Rodrigo Lazo and Jesse Alemán (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 89-109.
42. See Hymnary.org which provides a list of 30 hymns she is credited: https://hymnary.org/person/Pearson_EC1, accessed March 11, 2024.
43. "Death of a Remarkable Woman," *The Medford Mercury*, March 23, 1900, 1.

44. At the time of her death, she was a member of the West Medford Baptist Church where her funeral was held. See Obituary, *The Medford Mercury*, March 23, 1900, 1.
45. Emily C. Pearson, "The Lord is at Hand (Rev. xvi, 12-160)," *The Abilene Monitor*, March 23, 1893, 8.
46. Thanks to Catherine E. Saunders for bringing this source to my attention. Emily Clemons Pearson, "Women in the A. B. C. F. M.," *Congregationalist*, June 22, 1899, 84, 25.
47. "Death of a Remarkable Woman," *The Medford Mercury*, March 23, 1900, 1.
48. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/65975143/emily-catherine-pearson>. It should be noted that the birth date on her tombstone appears to be incorrect based upon more precise genealogical records that list her date of death and her precise age as noted in the first endnote.

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