

# Lamson, Phebe Marietta (1824–1883)

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Phebe Lamson, 1870s.

Photo from the Pacific Union College Heritage Room. Shared by Michael W. Campbell.

Phebe Marietta Lamson was a pioneer Adventist physician, author, and health educator. She was the first female Adventist physician and vigorous advocate of Adventist health reform, which she termed the “hygienic medical system” and believed was “the best in the world.”<sup>4</sup>

## Early Life

Phebe Marietta Lamson<sup>2</sup> was the oldest of eight children born to Jonathan (1793-1886) and Maria (1803-1873) Lamson.<sup>3</sup> She was born in 1824 in New York. While not much is known about her early life, she appears to have converted to Adventism with her family while living around Rochester, New York, during the early 1850s. She wrote her first article for an Adventist periodical in the July 1854 issue of the *Youth's Instructor*.<sup>4</sup> The next year she went with her sick father to Dr. James C. Jackson's “Our Home on the Hillside” in Dansville, New York, where she likely gained knowledge about hydropathic medicine.<sup>5</sup> In 1856, she and several family members contributed to the denomination's book fund.<sup>6</sup> In 1859, she expressed gratitude for the Lord “reviving his work” near them.<sup>7</sup>

## Health Reformer

Lamson shared testimonies in church periodicals as her faith changed. In 1861, Lamson expressed appreciation for the visions of Ellen White in *Testimony* pamphlet No. 6 removing “the scales . . . from our eyes.”<sup>6</sup> In 1863, she published a confession expressing her lack of support and critical spirit.<sup>9</sup> Lamson became a strong supporter of Adventist founders James and Ellen White. When critics questioned whether James White was getting rich as a church leader, she signed an affidavit on April 12, 1863, testifying to her confidence in James White’s integrity.<sup>10</sup> Later that year, she expressed appreciation for instruction from the “spirit of prophecy” that led her to adopt “reform in habits of diet.” She testified to an improvement in health, since “abandoning the use of flesh, especially pork, spices, and all high-seasoned preparations, without feeling any loss of relish for food.”<sup>11</sup>

When the Health Reform Institute opened in 1866, Lamson joined Horatio S. Lay (1828-1900) as medical personnel at the very first Adventist health institution. During the winter of 1867-68, she attended R. T. Trall’s Hygeio-Therapeutic College in New Jersey in order to secure a medical degree.<sup>12</sup> James White described her as a “competent physician.” She passionately advocated on behalf of “hygienic habits,” which she defined as: “Diet, right in quality and quantity; dress, physiological; pure water for drink; sufficient breathing of pure air; proper rest and exercise; sunlight; a cheerful spirit, etc.”<sup>13</sup> She advocated against poisonous drugs, especially tobacco.<sup>14</sup> For her, “hygienic practice” was the only “restorative” method. She argued against the “tired and disgusted . . . old practice of dosing and drugging, blistering and scarifying.”<sup>15</sup> Health was the result of following natural laws. Lamson believed that people only became sick when they violated “the laws of our being. It is natural to be well and happy if we obey those laws. We must, therefore, trace our pain or pleasure to our mental and physical acts.”<sup>16</sup> The best way to get better was to follow these natural laws.<sup>17</sup> According to Lamson, disease was caused by “an unbalanced circulation of the blood,” and water treatments could more evenly distribute the blood in the body. She believed natural water treatment and good food were the best remedies.<sup>18</sup> She especially recommended water treatments to combat fevers.<sup>19</sup> One of her favorite natural remedies was the sitz bath.<sup>20</sup>

Lamson often cited R. T. Trall, who advocated for preventative medicine. Both Lamson and Trall viewed the foremost cause of disease as “improper food.” She loved to share healthy recipes.<sup>21</sup> A wise health counselor, she encouraged people not to make changes too rapidly regarding health reform. She also reflected a common nineteenth-century understanding of human physiology as one of vitality that could be depleted, therefore she believed that removing too many “stimulating articles” at once could shock the system.<sup>22</sup> Health depended upon “every organ’s doing its whole duty through proper “circulation [of blood] vigorous and balanced.”<sup>23</sup> She concluded that the restoration of God’s law at the end of time entailed the understanding and restoration of physiological or health laws.

Lamson was a leading advocate for the early adoption of dress reform within early Seventh-day Adventism. At the 1868 General Conference Session, she was appointed chair of a committee to consider the subject of dress.<sup>24</sup> Their task included identifying what constituted a proper dress style, including hats.<sup>25</sup> Tight-fitting clothes that restricted the circulation of the body should be avoided.<sup>26</sup> “Every part of the body should be clothed physiologically,” which meant not wearing anything tight that might “interfere with the full and perfect function

of any part." She added "that everything put on should fit so easily and comfortably [so] as not to be felt."<sup>27</sup> By way of contrast, she warned that women's clothes that reduced "the circumference of the body around the lungs" reduced the length of a woman's life.<sup>28</sup> She detailed the reform dress:

A short chemise is the first garment worn, over which are two full suits of closely (not tightly) fitting undersuits, reaching to the ankles, having waists and sleeves made as one garment, one of cotton flannel, the other of thick woolen flannel. Some button the drawers on to the waist, but we see no advantage in doing it; we think them preferable made up whole. In summer these suits are exchanged for plain white muslin, made in the same way. Besides these are the paints made of the same cloth as the dress, stiffened with canvas, and faced with Morocco at the ankle like gentlemen's pants.<sup>29</sup>

This reform dress reform pattern could be purchased from her by writing to her at the Health Reform Institute at the cost of 50 cents.<sup>30</sup>

Dress reform also included footwear. Shoes should not "distort its shape, or destroy its comfort."<sup>31</sup> Lamson further urged people to avoid dangerous dyes, especially the color green, which could contain arsenic and be absorbed through the skin, thereby, poisoning the wearer.<sup>32</sup>

Lamson was an innovator who promoted the use of specific health or medical products. For example, she joined Ellen White in advertising the newly available "Self-acting fountain Syringe" for enemas.<sup>33</sup> She also advocated for less caustic soaps that she believed contributed to her outbreaks of eczema.<sup>34</sup> Her health column in the *Health Reformer* tackled a wide range of topics from how to treat burns (using flour and linseed oil) to whether raisins are appropriate to eat.<sup>35</sup> She also viewed that part of her role was to promote good health literature such as the tract by R. T. Trall on *The Health and Diseases of Woman* (1872).<sup>36</sup>

Lamson was a stronger believer in evangelism through health work. Young Philena Howe (1854-1885), who worked at the sanitarium for about a year, became a Christian due to Lamson's personal influence.<sup>37</sup> Lamson frequently donated her own income to support church ministries. In 1868, she gave \$3.00 to assist Nathan Fuller (1825-1895), an early church pastor who was in need.<sup>38</sup> She purchased \$10 worth of shares in the Publishing Association in 1871.<sup>39</sup> Three years later she contributed \$25 to the S. D. A. Educational Society that helped found what became Battle Creek College.<sup>40</sup> Later she contributed \$5 to the fund for the proposed Dime Tabernacle.<sup>41</sup> In 1880, she became a life member of the General Tract & Missionary Society.<sup>42</sup> Even in her will, she set aside funds specifically for Adventist missions.<sup>43</sup>

In 1876, Lamson welcomed young Dr. J. H. Kellogg, who recently graduated from Bellevue Medical College. He became medical director, along with Drs. Lindsay, Fairfield, and Sprague.<sup>44</sup> Two years later the staff included between 70 to 80 persons with a new \$100,000 building.<sup>45</sup> This new facility accommodated 350 to 400 patients. James White, the chair of the board of directors, observed that approximately 4,000 patients had been treated there during the previous decade.<sup>46</sup> Many of these patients had been treated by Lamson who was the only

physician to work consistently at the Health Reform Institute from when it opened until Kellogg took over leadership.

## Death and Legacy

At the end of July 1883, Lamson left on vacation to visit relatives.<sup>47</sup> On July 30, 1883, she met her sister in Detroit, Michigan. Upon arrival, she learned that her friend, Charles W. Stone, had died in a train accident. This came as such a “shock” that Uriah Smith believed it contributed to her falling ill with pneumonia almost immediately afterward. By the time she reached friends in Newfane, New York, she was very sick.<sup>48</sup> Three days later, on August 2, she died deliriously thinking she was back at the health institution that she loved so much. Her last words, quoting from Isa. 26:4, were “everlasting strength!”<sup>49</sup> A memorial service was held in the Battle Creek Sanitarium.<sup>50</sup> The actual funeral was held on August 4 by a Presbyterian minister, and Uriah Smith arrived on August 9 to visit her grave beside Lake Ontario. She is buried in West Lake Road Cemetery in Olcott, New York.<sup>51</sup> Smith noted that she would not have wanted such attention. He stated that her life was an example of total unselfishness. She was fondly remembered for her warm bedside manner and sympathy with patients.<sup>52</sup> One newspaper correspondent described her as “very kind to the sick.”<sup>53</sup>

After her death, a life-size portrait of Lamson was hung on the third floor of the Battle Creek Sanitarium. It celebrated her “modest life and good works” that were remembered by the “members of the Sanitarium family.”<sup>54</sup> The General Conference voted a resolution of mourning noting her impact upon the denomination through her “faithful labors,” “self-sacrificing spirit,” and “meek and quiet deportment” while still maintaining an “unwavering fidelity in the service of her Master.”<sup>55</sup>

Lamson was the first woman physician in Adventist history and began the Health Reform Institute with Dr. Lay. After Dr. Lay left, a series of other physicians came and left the Health Institute, yet she effectively held this early center of Adventist health reform together during its most formative stage. Lamson continued her support of the young Kellogg as he took over and rapidly expanded this first Adventist health institution. Kellogg’s focus on his own contributions, including having portions of the original Health Reform Institute airbrushed out in photographs to show how small it had been in contrast to how large he had made it, contributed in no small way to his overlooking the early and formative contributions of individuals, such as Lamson, who had established this first health institution and had run it for a decade before his arrival!<sup>56</sup> Her unexpected and early death, and lack of a published obituary, similarly contributed to her memory being largely elided from Adventist history.<sup>57</sup>

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## NOTES

1. P. M. Lamson, "Mistreatment," *The Health Reformer*, October 1872, 312.
2. Contemporary records of her life, including in Adventist periodicals, spell her name as "Phebe." At some later point after her death, she began to be referred to as "Phoebe," but this article retains this earlier, original spelling. Her name appears as "Phoebe" for the first time: Louis A. Hansen, "The Past and Present of Our Medical Work," *ARH*, September 18, 1924, 43, and copied as "Phoebe" in subsequent denominational publications.
3. For a detailed genealogy, see: <http://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/tools/tree/184953849/invitees/accept?inviteId=0abf4972-8a30-4b88-87c9-4fa8c191419f> [accessed 9/16/22]. Maria Lamson Obituary, *ARH*, April 1, 1873, 127.
4. Phebe M. Lamson, "From Phebe M. Lamson," *Youth's Instructor*, July 1854, 54.
5. See Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 160.
6. Jona. Lamson, J. B. Lamson, P. M. Lamson, M. Lamson, and C. Lamson were all contributors. See "Receipts for Book Fund," *ARH*, July 3, 1856, 104.
7. See note, *ARH*, August 11, 1859, 95.
8. Under "Letters," *ARH*, April 2, 1861, 159.

9. P. M. Lamson, "From Sister Lamson," *ARH*, July 28, 1863, 71.
10. *Vindication of the Business Career of Elder James White* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1872), 31.
11. See letter, *ARH*, November 15, 1864, 199.
12. Dr. [William] Russell, "The Time to Secure Health," *The Health Reformer*, March 1868, 136.
13. P. M. Lamson, "Catarrh," *The Health Reformer*, May 1872, 132-33.
14. P. M. Lamson, "The Use of Tobacco," *The Health Reformer*, January 1874, 19-20.
15. P. M. Lamson, "Health," *The Health Reformer*, August 1872, 226.
16. P. M. Lamson, "Tight Dressing," *The Health Reformer*, August 1870, 32-33.
17. P. M. Lamson, "Some Thoughts About Bathing," *The Health Reformer*, December 1869, 109-10.
18. P. M. Lamson, "Poisons," *The Health Reformer*, August 1867, 21.
19. P. M. Lamson, "Some Thoughts About Bathing," *The Health Reformer*, December 1869, 109-10.
20. Miss Dr. [P. M.] Lamson, "A Few Hints on Taking Baths," *The Health Reformer*, October 1867, 51-52; idem., "A Few More Hints on Taking Baths," *The Health Reformer*, November 1867, 71.
21. See P. M. Lamson, "Hygienic Dietary," *Health Reformer*, April 1868, 147; P. M. Lamson, "Adulteration of Lard," *The Health Reformer*, February 1872, 36; Cf. M. G. Kellogg, M.D., and P. M. Lamson, M.D., "Practical Recipes," *The Health Reformer*, May 1868, 174-75.
22. P. M. Lamson, "A Word of Caution," *The Health Reformer*, June 1868, 185-86.
23. P. M. Lamson, "A Plea for the Babies," *The Health Reformer*, September 1868, 47.
24. General Conference Committee Minutes, Wed. May 16, 1868, available from:  
<https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCSM/GCB1863-88.pdf> [accessed 9/17/22].
25. "Business Proceedings: Of the Sixth Annual Session of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists," May 26, 1868, 356.
26. P. M. Lamson, "Tight Dressing," *The Health Reformer*, August 1870, 32-33.
27. P. M. Lamson, "Evil Habits of Dress," *The Health Reformer*, December 1871, 162-63.

28. Miss Dr. [P. M.] Lamson, "Happiness a Natural Condition," *The Health Reformer*, May 1867, 153-54.
29. Miss Dr. [P. M.] Lamson, "Reform Dress," *The Health Reformer*, March 1868, 136.
30. See note, *The Health Reformer*, February 1876, 64; Noted by Francis D. Nichol, *Ellen G. White and Her Critics: An Answer to the Major Charges that Critics Have Brought Against Mrs. Ellen G. White* (Takoma Park, DC: Review and Herald, 1951), 152. See *The Health Reformer*, March 1868, 144.
31. P. M. Lamson, "A Healthful Style of Shoe Needed," *The Health Reformer*, April 1872, 99.
32. P. M. Lamson, "Arsenic in our Dress and Habitations," *The Health Reformer*, September 1872, 258-59.
33. See advertisement, *The Health Reformer*, January 1871, 144.
34. P. M. Lamson, "Adulteration of Food," *The Health Reformer*, November 1872, 344, 345.
35. P. M. Lamson, "Treatment of Burns and Scalds," *The Health Reformer*, February 1873, 35-36; idem., "The Raisin," *The Health Reformer*, May 183, 150.
36. R. T. Trall, *The Health and Diseases of Woman* (Battle Creek, MI: Office of the Health Reformer, 1873).
37. See Obituary, *ARH*, July 14, 1885, 446.
38. See her name under list of "Receipts," *ARH*, April 14, 1868, 288.
39. *ARH*, May 23, 1871, 184.
40. See list of contributors, *ARH*, January 1, 1875, 8.
41. See "The Dime Tabernacle: Receipts to August 1, 1878," *ARH*, Supplement to Vol. 52, no. 9, August 22, 1878, 1, 2.
42. "Gen. T. & M. Society—Life Members," *ARH*, April 22, 1880, 272.
43. See lists of contributed funds, *ARH*, May 27, 1884, 351.
44. J. W[hite], "Our Health Institute," *ARH*, October 19, 1876, 124.
45. J. W[hite], "Battle Creek," *ST*, July 4, 1878, 196.
46. Ibid.



47. See the announcement on the back page, *Good Health*, August 1883, 254.
48. Announcement, *ARH*, August 7, 1883, 512.
49. [Uriah Smith], "The Blessed Hope," *ARH*, August 14, 1883, 520.
50. Announcement, *ARH*, August 7, 1883, 512.
51. <https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/66695/west-lake-road-cemetery> [accessed 9/17/22].
52. Uriah Smith, "The Blessed Hope," *ARH*, August 14, 1883, 520.
53. S. M. M., "Health Hunting—No. 9," *The Indiana Herald (Huntington, Indiana)*, April 7, 1880, 1.
54. See the announcement on the back page, *Good Health*, June 1885, 192.
55. *The Seventh-day Adventist Year Book 1884 Containing Statistics of the General Conference and Other Organizations of the Denomination, with the Business Proceedings of the Anniversary Meetings Held at Battle Creek, Michigan, Nov. 8-20, 1883* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1884), 63; "The Health Reform Institute," *ARH*, January 1, 1884, 4.
56. I am grateful for this insight to the late Stan Hickerson. To see the pictures of the photograph altered at Kellogg's behest to the original photograph of the Health Reform Institute, compare the original photo <https://ellenwhite.org/media/image/1084> with [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e2/The\\_origin\\_of\\_the\\_Battle\\_Creek\\_Sanitarium.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e2/The_origin_of_the_Battle_Creek_Sanitarium.jpg) which leaves out the back portion of the building and titles it with the diminutive "water cure."
57. See note on back page: *Good Health*, September 1883, 288; Announcement, *ARH*, August 7, 1883, 512.

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