

# REUBEN CHAMBERS.

---

The subject of this sketch was adorned from childhood with the neither euphonious nor fashionable name of Reuben—Reuben Chambers. He was born about the beginning of the present century in Loudon Grove township, Chester county, Pa., and resided there until he reached manhood.

He was of Quaker parentage and inherited many of the well-known traits of that sect, who are noted for their high moral character, general intelligence and their desire to investigate things for themselves and not take their opinions from others.

Reuben received a good common school education, and being fond of reading and investigating continued to learn all his life. He had great faith, moreover, in his own ability and would tackle without hesitation every new question or ism or doctrine that sprung up, no matter how weighty or difficult it might be, and after making up his mind about it would defend his conclusions with great zeal. It must be confessed, however, that Reuben had many novel ideas and queer ways of doing things. For example, his mode of securing a wife was quite unique. It was related by himself about as follows : " When I got old enough to think about marriage I got myself a neat memorandum book to carry in my pocket. Whenever I saw a girl that I thought would be suitable I entered her name and residence in this book, and when I had about twenty names I started in to get acquainted with them. In this I did not adopt the usual

plan and call on the girls in the evening when their work was done and they were presumably fixed up. I called in the gay time when they were at work or should be ; many of them I found at the wash tub. I never remained very long and could generally make up my mind in one or two visits whether they would suit me or not. When I decided that any one would not suit I crossed her name off, but in the meantime continued to add *new* names **as at** first. I continued this until my book contained about eighty names, and all but one was crossed. I was then ready to marry. So I went to see her and told her *I* wanted to marry and believed her the most suitable girl for me that I was acquainted with, and that if she was willing to marry me I should be very glad. She said she was willing, so we were married very soon." Mrs. Chambers' maiden name was Christiana Lefever and she was born and raised near Hopewell borough, Chester county, Pa. I think the general notion of the neighbors was that Christiana made him a very faithful wife, notwithstanding her methodical and business-like courtship.

Reuben began life as a school teacher and about 1829 or 1830 came into Lancaster county and started a subscription school (there being then no free school) in a small village on the road from Strasburg to the Gap, about two miles west of the latter place. Reuben baptized the village Bethania, but it was more generally known in the neighborhood as Pudingtown.

I have not been able to find any one who went to Reuben's school **at** this time, but believe he was fairly successful with it. At the end of the first year, however, the image of the maiden whose name alone stood out unmarked among her seventy-nine crossed off sisters in the

little book *he* carried in his inside vest pocket grew so vivid that Reuben could no longer resist its mute appeals, and having meantime purchased the house in which he taught the school and a few acres *of* land with it, he went back to Chester county and soon returned with his bride to Bethania.

Reuben's marriage seemed to stir him with higher ambitions and stimulate him to attempt greater achievements than fall to the lot of the humble teacher, and having a taste for printing and as he believed a talent for writing, he allowed his school to close and providing himself with material for *a* small printing office began to do small jobs of printing.

His ambition now was to edit and publish a great newspaper which should educate and elevate mankind, and he consequently tackled all sorts of isms and doctrines. In religion he became a Free Thinker ; in earthly matters a Communist, and in everything else a little different from those he met with. Reuben's Lancaster county neighbors didn't take much stock in new isms or dectrines

hadn't time to chop logic or split hairs with him on subjects they neither knew nor cared about and it was not long until they came to regard him as a pestilent, quarrelsome fanatic ; an infidel and a totally impracticable crank, with whom the less they had to do the better.

The charges of infidelity and crankiness were not without foundation, but it cannot be fairly said that he was quarrelsome, though the pertinacity with which he adhered to an argument and the fact that the hotter it became the better it seemed to suit him naturally gave rise to this opinion. Reuben was very fond of discussion and would miss a meal any time to argue a question, though in these discussions he was usually good humored

and fair. Many of Reuben's ideas were far ahead of his time and surroundings ; for example, on finance he was 100 years ahead of either Greenbackers, Populist; Gold Bugs or Silverities. **He** held that as labor was the source of all wealth, the money or currency of the country should directly represent the labor and not by the indirect method of reckoning it in dollars and cents. To reduce this theory to actual practice he printed a series of notes reading as follows:

No. 14.	AMERICAN PRODUCT.	10
Letter I.	Picture of	Hours.
	Car, Tender and Locomotive.	

The bearer is entitled to receive on demand Ten Hours Labor of the BETHANIAN MANUAL LABOR and MANUFACTURING COMMUNITY, or an equivalent in goods the product of the Community at the Magazine.

Z Bethania, January 1st, 1837.

REUBEN CHAMBERS,  
Director.

These notes were made in all denominations from six minutes to twenty hours and perhaps higher, but that is the highest I ever saw. It will be readily seen that while the world was being converted to Reuben's system of currency he must in order to have it circulate with other money fix a rate for its valuation in dollars and cents. While Reuben strongly regretted this, he admitted its necessity and fixed the rates at five cents per hour, which at that time, 1837, was about the price paid for ordinary farm labor. The notes, therefore, reduced to dollars and cents ran as follows :

6 minute note, 4 cent.

12 minute note, 1 cent.

1 hour note, 5 cents.

10 hour note, 50 cents.

20 hour note, 100 cents.

Many issues of these notes were made. I have in my possession one of 10 hours or 50 cent; printed in 1858, and Mr. J. M. W. Geist, of THE NEW ERA, has one of 12 minutes, dated 1842.

He also set apart a small room in his house as a magazine in which to store the products of the community and got so far as to dig part of a cellar for the contemplated magazine, but it stopped there and never got farther. I might say here that both the Bethania Manual Labor and Manufacturing Community and the magazine were purely imaginary and never had any existence except as above stated. Reuben never learned any trade, but was a natural Jack of all trades. He was a tolerable carpenter, wagon maker, harness maker, tooth puller, painter, plasterer, potter and indeed almost anything that did not require much exertion, for he could not be charged with any extraordinary fondness for hard work. He preferred thinking to working, and in pursuance of this preference soon discovered that a newspaper run on different lines from any then issued was absolutely necessary and that he was the man to furnish it.

So on 6th day, 6th month, 8th, 1832, he issued the first or specimen number, calling it the *Bethania Palladium*.

An extract from the prospectus reads : "The *Palladium* will therefore advocate universal peace, freedom, temperance and the just rights of man. It will encourage husbandry, manufactures and the arts ; it will also encourage public schools for the education of the youth and will particularly plead the cause of the poor and oppressed."

And in his leading editorial he says : "When I consider myself that I have never wrought in any printing office one hour except my own, being self-taught in the business and especially having never done anything at printing a newspaper before, I must ask to be excused for any inconsistency or omission on these accounts. His second number was

issued 6th day, 7th month, 27th, 1832, seven weeks after the first number, and thereafter during its existence of about two years at uncertain intervals of one to three weeks.

The paper was intensely anti-slavery, anti-Masonic, anti-Jackson, anti-lotteries and anti-horse racing, this last feature getting him into innumerable wrangles which he seemed to thoroughly enjoy, for Reuben was at home in a scolding match.

A great feature of the *Palladium* was its number of departments, though they were not at all uniform in the different numbers. When Reuben saw an article he wanted to publish and had no department that seemed to exactly fit it, he at once made one. For example, I find in one issue the following departments : Education department, Indians' department, anti-slavery department, peace department, temperance department, gamblers' department, political department, farmers' department, news department, advertising department, didactic department, ladies' department, mechanics' department, youths' department.

Reuben had no patience with fun or sport of any kind, even on the part of boys, and in his issue of November 2, 1832, thus curries down some of the village lads who had been enjoying Hallowe'en : " **The** evening before last was that termed Hallowe'en, which is devoted to night raking by the mischievous, owlish boobies, who pretend that they take a pleasure in pulling up their neighbor's cabbage, over-turning privies and yelping about the hills like a set of crazy fools."

On a later occasion the village tavern keeper, John Rockey, made a fox hunt from his hotel of which Reuben delivered himself as follows : " With feelings of disapprobation I have witnessed the collooting together of a number of **my** neigh-

bors to-day to have a chase after a Bag Fox with their half bound canine breed of yelpers that look their masters in the face and try to bark after the fox was far enough over the mountain, fully evincing their knowledge of hunting to be about equal to that of their owners." This was copiously embellished with italics and small caps, and he continued : "Is not this altogether a scheme of tavern keepers to entice the young, the thoughtless, the idle, the vain, the unstable, the wavering and light-minded to flock to and rendezvous at these places, drink grog and be gulled out of their clear cash ? Is not this low-minded custom a breach of our laws and ought it not to be frowned out of countenance till it be altogether done away ?" The tavern keeper promptly sued Reuben for \$1.24 he owed him, and the resulting wrangle furnished editorial matter for the *Palladium* for some time, as well as enabling Reuben to free his mind as to the tavern keeper and some of the other participants in the fox hunt.

The *Palladium* had always been very free in criticising what it called the Lancaster Jockey Club, and especially its treasurer, one Edward Parker, and probably for this reason arrangements were made in September, 1833, for some racing on the top of the Mine Ridge, about a mile from the office of the *Palladium*. Then the cup of Reuben's wrath overflowed and he was compelled to issue a supplement of a half sheet printed on one side to express himself, which he did in a lengthy article entitled, "The Lower Regions, or a Second Sodom," in very large type.

Reuben's charges against the horse race were that they had a number of tables from which whisky and other liquors were sold that there were three gaming tables, one of which was kept by

John Bowman, of Strasburg; that there were gamblers there from New Jersey who swindled much money from the poor Irish railroaders (the State road then being built), and that he saw several men and one woman lying in fence corners dead drunk.

Reuben also gave considerable attention to a certain Judge Lightner, who lived in Wiiliamstown, and who he claimed could have prevented the racing and would not.

Reuben not only wrote the editorial and local matter appearing in the *Palladium*, but to a large extent set the type, made up the forms and printed the edition on an old hand press. He was also an author, as I can attest, for I took my first lesson in a blue-covered primer compiled and printed by him, and want to say for him that it was a very good primer, arranged in a scientific manner and quite the equal of some modern books with more pictures. This opinion is not founded on my early researches, but from subsequent examination of the primer. He also took up the Thompsonian System of Medicine and practiced it upon himself and anybody else that would let him (though they were not numerous), and wrote, printed and published quite a large and pretentious work entitled "The Thomsonian System and Practice of Medicine," which he sold for \$2, if he ever did sell any.

I have read this medical work to some extent, but the only thing I can now recall in it was its strong recommendation of quill toothpicks in preference to all others, with detailed instructions for making them. He also engaged largely in compounding Thompsonian medicines, for which purpose he purchased from the village boys during the summer months vast *quantities* of herbs and weeds of



every obtainable kind (the Thompsonian preparations being purely vegetable), paying for the **same** in the labor notes he issued.

He also carried on a pottery for making stovepipe guards, crocks, jars, etc., but they were mainly used for holding the weeds and liquors while he was brewing and compounding the Thompsonian medicines.

The most popular and best remembered of these preparations was known as No. 6, and the triple extract of the strongest cayenne or red pepper couldn't hold a candle to No. 6 for biting and burning properties. It was used extensively for toothache, and was pretty effective, for after you put it in your mouth it took an hour or so to convince *you* that mouth, teeth and all were not burned away.

Bread of Life, a hot biting candy, was popular with the children.

My first personal acquaintance with Reuben was in the fall of 1850. It seemed that in the spring of that year Reuben had hauled down to a mill in the western part of the village of Christiana, then run

by a certain John Boone, an ox cart load of dried sumac berries, leaves and twigs, and left them to be ground. The stuff was packed in coffee and salt sacks and piled up in one corner of the mill. Boone's lease of the mill expired soon after and he did not grind the sumac. He was succeeded in the mill by a Samuel Harley, who would not grind it, and in the fall of the year I, an over-grown boy of eighteen, was appointed to teach the village school at Christiana, and I secured boarding with the miller, Harley. Very many of those coming to the mill would inquire what was in those sacks, and being told it was sumac belonging to Reuben Chambers, would at once cut a slit in the sack

to see what it was like. To prevent the

stuff from running all over the floor Harley would turn the cut side round against the other sacks and the next inquirer would cut a fresh slit for himself.

Harley, on learning that I was going up to Bethania one Saturday, made me promise to call on Chambers and tell him that he would not grind the sumac and if he did not come down and take it away he would throw it out.

I called on Reuben and delivered the message and he said he would come down in a day or two. **lie** came and of course discovered how his sacks were cut up. He went home and the next day a man came with the oxcart for the sumac and Reuben came with a large roll of flaring hand bills, which he proceeded to put up all over the village and neighborhood, offering \$50 reward for information as to the guilty parties and paying his respects to them as follows :

"There was left In the third month (March) last **at** J. G. Ernst's mill, while said mill was in the occupancy of John Boonc, a number of bags of mine, since which some rascally, good-for-nothing biped puppy brute scoundrel (all without commas), one or more such did since then with an instrument to me unknown cut a number of holes in several of them to the great loss and detriment of the owner and greatly against the public peace and the laws of this Commonwealth."

Reuben was never called on for the reward, as I suppose half the adult males of the village and all the boys had at one time or another investigated the sumac.

I removed to Bethania in the spring of 1853, and a year afterwards our family came there to live, so I got quite well acquainted with Reuben. He had long before that given up the newspaper, which had surely lost him considerable money, but he still continued the printing office, doing such job work as came to him.

In printing sale bills he insisted on saying that the sale would be in instead of *on a* particular day, and he spelled cook stove kook, with other similar improvements as Reuben termed them, but it led to frequent squabbles with customers who desired him to follow copy. Reuben's rules, however, were ironclad, and no bills left his office without the improvements.

For several years about this time we had a lyceum at the Bethania school house which I think was the strongest in the county. Sylvester Kennedy, father of Horace E. Kennedy, of *The Horning Nei s*, was its president, and Thomas Whitson, father of our lawyer of the same name, Dr. W. H. Boone, Henry Umble, J. Williams Thorne and Major Ellwood Griest, of the *Inquirer*, all practiced debaters, were among the members. Reuben was prominent in this lyceum, but was not a ready or effective speaker and therefore when he wanted to do his best wrote out his speeches and read them.

On one occasion a heavy debate was on hand on the well-worn question of abolishing capital punishment, and Reuben prepared for it by writing out a lengthy speech. When he got up to deliver it the lights did not seem to suit him. He changed positions several times, but it would not work. He then got his high silk hat, which he wore for this occasion, and put it on to shade his eyes, and the irreverent small boy snickered thereat, but even the hat improvement would not answer the purpose. So Reuben got his old style tin lantern which he never went without at night ; it was all tin, with slits and holes in the tin to let some light out. He deliberately lighted this lantern and hugging it to his side, and opening its door to

let the light shine on his manuscript, started to find his place. By this time the house was in a roar, but Reuben was serene as a sunflower, paid no attention to the uproar and soon as he could be heard started again on his speech. When his time expired he wrangled with the president for charging him for the time spent on the lantern, but the president did not allow his decisions to be disputed and promptly seated Reuben, much to his disgust.

Outside of a real hot scolding match Reuben liked nothing so well as an opportunity to practice his system of medicine and about this time he managed to secure a rare opportunity. The victim was a German man living in the neighborhood of Oregon, this county. How or where Reuben met him I never learned nor can I recall the man's name, but he was troubled with rheumatism and Reuben undertook his cure. So he came down home and at once commenced the erection of a steam chest. This occupied a couple of weeks, during which I saw nothing of him. One afternoon a small girl who lived with them came up to the store and said Reuben wanted me to come down, he wanted to show me something, and the others present, she said, might come too. Several of us went down and she told us to go back into the kitchen. We went and there was Reuben in this box. The top lid was made to fit tightly around his neck, and his face, which was outside the box, was as red as blood and had a most agonizing expression. I supposed he **was** being choked to death and I dashed at the lid to try to relieve him, but he shouted to me not to touch it; that he was taking a steam bath. I said, "Why, your face shows you are suffering great agony," and he replied, "Thee knows nothing about it ; the sensation is just delightful." I presume that he exposed himself improperly

after this bath, for I met him the next day and he was quite hoarse. I said, "Reuben, your steam bath seems to have given you a cold." He flew into a towering rage at once and said, "Thee's a liar. It is not a cold at all. Just a little roughness in the throat and the bath had no connection with it whatever." In a few days Reuben appeared upon the street one afternoon. He had a market wagon, in which was loaded this steam chest with the necessary pipes and fixings and upon either side of the wagon were strips of white muslin the whole length of the wagon, and say, eighteen inches wide, on which printed in large letters were these lines:

"There is balm in Gilead  
And a physician there—"

a seeming answer to the Biblical question. And thus equipped he started to Oregon to cure his patient. Reuben would never say much about this case afterward, and I never learned whether he steamed the man or not, but one thing is sure, it did not take the man or his friends long to get the measure of Reuben's medical knowledge, for I think that was his only visit to Oregon.

Reuben, while never suspected of any undue intimacy with Amos Clemson, whose house was recognized as the headquarters of the notorious Gap gang, had always been on friendly terms with him and after Clemson's conviction, and in the absence of any near relations took charge of his property. Clemson's place was about two and a-half miles east of Bethania, and while down there picking apples on Tuesday, September 27, 1859, he fell from a tree and injured himself very seriously. He was brought home, but none of his neighbors were informed of his condition, nor would Reuben permit any physician to be called. He was treated

by his wife under his own direction, and growing rapidly worse died on Saturday, October 1.

His funeral took place on the following Tuesday, when a short but very sensible address was delivered at the house by his aged mother, a very fine-looking and intellectual old lady. The remains were interred in the burying ground of " Old Sadsbury," a well-known Friends Meeting House, near the Lancaster and Chester county line, in Sadsbury township, this county.

Author: Houston, R. J.

Title: Reuben Chambers / by R. J. Houston.

Primary Material: Book

Subject(s): Chambers, Reuben, d. 1859.

Publisher: Lancaster, Pa. : Lancaster County Historical Society,  
1896-97

Description: [119]-132 p. ; 23 cm.

Series: Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society ; v. 1,  
no. 4

Call Number: 974.9 L245 v.1

Location: LCHSJL -- Journal Article (reading room)

=====

+++++

Institution Name

Institution Address

Institution Phone Number

Institution E-mail Address