

## Unitarian-Universalist Church To Observe 125th Anniversary

Each of Now-Merged Groups Founded Here in 1831;  
Lincoln's Visit in 1861 One of Historical High Spots

By PRESTON SMITH

Ministers were the targets of egg-throwing in the early days of liberal religion in Buffalo. Today the Unitarian-Universalist Church of Greater Buffalo in accepted faith, standing firmly on an enviable record of religious and social achievements in the community.

When the church observes its 125th anniversary Dec. 2, such historic events as Abraham Lincoln's visit in 1861 will be recalled. He attended a service in the old Unitarian Church and sat with Millard Fillmore, a member.

The anniversary will mark one of the few times that the regular Sunday worship services have been suspended. Instead of the morning service in the Buffalo Church and the evening church in the Williamsville Church, a combined worship, followed by a banquet and program, will be held at 4:30 PM in the Buffalo Church, Elmwood Ave. and W. Ferry St.

### **"Grew Up" Downtown**

Both the First Universalist Society and the First Unitarian Society of the Village of Buffalo were organized in 1831, when Buffalo had a population of about 13,000.

The two churches "grew up" in the downtown section, later moved to West Side sites about a mile apart and three years ago merged to form the present organization. Dr. Herbert Hitchen and the Rev. Robert L. Cope are co-ministers.

The doctrine of Universalism promised eternal salvation for all men [sic]. Some of the more orthodox Christians, who believed that only a select few would get to heaven and others would not, took a definite dislike to the Universalists.

### **Sent Hired Man to Spy**

When services were started in 1832 in the Universalist Church on Washington St. near Swan, some citizens tossed eggs at the ministers when they entered. One resident, curious to know what went on inside the church but not daring to "risk" his own soul by attending, sent his hired man to investigate.

The Unitarian Society suffered less abuse when it opened its doors in 1831 in a small hall on the site of what is now the Ellicott Square. Apparently its doctrine, stressing unity of God—rather than the Trinity—and affirming the "dignity of man" was less objectionable.

As time went on, doctrinal differences became minor issues. This eventually brought about the merger of the two churches. The "great universals and unities of life" were stressed and doctrinal matters were

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tested by "the application of human intelligence and experience," Dr. Hitchen explained.

### **Pews Sold to Worshipers**

Organization of the Unitarian Church stemmed from the visit of a New England minister who preached in the old Buffalo Courthouse in 1831. The first minister, the Rev. William S. Brown, was engaged in 1833 at a yearly salary of \$1000.

That same year, \$3000 was raised and \$1000 borrowed to build the first church at Franklin and Eagle Sts. The building is still standing and is occupied by the Buffalo Abstract & Title Co. In those days pews [e.g. the right to occupy them] were sold to worshipers at \$225 each, or lower, and an annual 10% tax was imposed on the pews to pay church expenses.

The first two ministers found Buffalo's climate so severe that they remained only a few months. The third clergyman, the Rev. George W. Hosmer, held the pulpit for 33 years, longest tenure of any minister in the entire history of the church.

Under his leadership the church grew steadily. After the financial depression of 1837, the building was twice enlarged and a parsonage purchased.

### **Damaged by Fire in 1859**

The church was damaged badly by fire in April 1859 and the congregation worshipped in the Methodist Church until repairs were completed the following August.

Lincoln attended the service on his way to Washington for his first inauguration. After the first Battle of Bull Run, women of the church sent bundles of dressings to the front, the first time this had been done by any church group in the country.

One of the rare occasions when the Sunday service was suspended was during the Civil War. Dr. Hosmer told members when they arrived to go home and take their Sunday dinners down to the Exchange St. station, where a trainload of hungry soldiers was stranded.

### **Present Church Built in 1904**

In 1880 the church moved to a new building at Delaware Ave. and Mohawk St. and took the name of "The Church of Our Father." By 1904 this site was considered "too far downtown" and the present church was erected at Elmwood Ave. and W. Ferry St.

During a period of nearly two years when the congregation was "homeless," members worshiped in the Universalist Church, which was built in 1892 at North and Mariner Sts.

Universalists held their first meeting in Buffalo in a barn at Main and Genesee Sts. In 1816. A Universalist society was formed in 1823 but

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disbanded a few years later. The church, incorporated in 1831, almost suffered the same fate as the society.

### **Church on Flint & Kent Site**

During the depression in the late '30s interest lagged and the Washington St. building was rented for several years to the Trinity Episcopal Society.

Sparked by the leadership of Dr. J. H. [Jonas Hazard] Hartzell, who began a 12-year pastorate in 1858, the church expanded and built a larger building in 1866 on what is now the site of Flint & Kent.

Fire destroyed the church in 1870 but it was rebuilt and the congregation worshiped there until moving to North St.

One of the church's women's group[s], the Benevolent Union, did most of the work that is now carried on by charity organizations. The church's Literary Club was for many years a center of the city's cultural life.

After the Unitarian-Universalist merger in 1953, the North St. property was abandoned and the congregation joined the Unitarians.

### **Tribute to Pastor Emeritus**

The old Calvary Episcopal Church at Milton and Los Robles, Williamsville, was purchased to expand the congregation's outreach in the suburban area. The Williamsville "branch" grew so rapidly that it became impossible to accommodate everyone at the same time on Sunday mornings. The problem was solved by holding church school sessions in the morning and moving the adult worship services to Sunday evenings.

During the anniversary[,] special tribute will be paid to Dr. Richard W. Boynton, minister emeritus and professor of philosophy in the University of Buffalo.

Members of the Anniversary Committee are John S. N. Sprague, a great-grandson of one of the Unitarian founders; Ralph W. Stoddard, Boyce H. Butterfield, Mrs. Donald W. Beebe, Mr. Cope and Dr. Hitchen.

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