

Huntington, L[ong] I[sland]

By Rev. E[ben] Francis

Universalism in Huntington can be directly traced to the early part of this century, when Mrs. Mary Conklin, who was a member of the Presbyterian Church here, having embraced the faith, "publicly renounced the doctrine of endless misery." "She then asked for and received an honorable dismissal from the church." This was some 25 or 30 years before her death, which occurred February 21, 1838. She was a zealous and devout believer, and her influence was widely felt and happily exerted.

The late Russell Woodward, a man highly esteemed in the community, was long known as a steadfast Universalist. His father, Thomas Woodward, also was an earnest believer. It was in his house (which formerly stood in plain sight of the Universalist church) that the first sermon was preached in defense of the doctrine. This was previous to the year 1826, and was delivered by the late Rev. Edward Mitchell, of New York.

From that time to the year 1836, the sentiment gradually extended among the people; and defenders of the faith, with more or less frequency, visited the place and proclaimed the glad tidings. Among these preachers are preserved the names of Hillyer, Bulkeley, Case, Fishbough, Hallock, Marvin and Lyon. Other names there may have been, but though lost from memory, the fruit of their faithful labors is to be discerned in this and other places, where good and honest hearts have borne the precious seed of truth, and permitted it to germinate and grow. One of the most efficient preachers was the late Rev. S[haler] J. Hillyer, who had appointments here as early as December, 1832. He continued to visit the place, sometimes regularly once a month, for a long series of years.

Until the year 1837, religious services were usually held in a District School House which was long since removed. Occasionally, a meeting was held at a private dwelling.

In August, 1835, a public Discussion, which continued for three days, was had in the Methodist church in the village, between the then Pastor of the church, Rev. Ira Ferris, and Rev. S. C. Bulkeley—on the question of Endless Punishment and Final Salvation.

This discussion caused no little excitement, and was attended by crowded assemblies. Its more marked result was the legal formation of the Universalist Society, and not long after, the building of a church.

The Society was organized January 3, 1836, when the proper officers were chosen and a constitution adopted. And it is worthy of note that of the six articles then agreed upon, it has not been found necessary to make the slightest change, save in the single item of the time for holding the annual meeting. During these thirty years they have proved to be amply sufficient for the wants of the Society. But death has done its work with those who were the original members. More than half of that band of brethren and sisters in the faith have closed their earthly labors. Some have made their homes in other places. Some yet remain, cheering us by their presence and counsel [sic], while a few, enfeebled by years, linger for the final summons. Others of course, from time to time, have been added to the list of members.

Huntington, L[ong] I[sland]

The Clerk, who was elected at the first meeting of the society, has been re-elected from year to year, and is now, as he has long been, Clerk, Treasurer, and a Trustee.

Measures were soon taken for the building of a house of worship. A beautiful site was purchased, on a commanding eminence, next to the ancient burial-lot in the village, where the British lay entrenched during the Revolutionary War. In October, 1837, at the time of the meeting of the New York Association [of Universalists] for that year, the little Church was solemnly dedicated; the sermon being preached by Rev. (now Dr.) I[saac] D. Williamson, and the prayer of consecration offered by Rev. (now Dr.) T[homas] J. Sawyer. It was an occasion of great rejoicing to those who were present. For, throughout the whole of Long Island, there was but one other spot where the denomination had so strong a foothold as here. That spot was in Southold, at the eastern end of the island, where two months previous, a neat and convenient church had been dedicated. At that date, although there had been occasional preaching in Brooklyn, our friends there were not numerous and strong enough to organize societies and build churches. Very different is the condition of things there to-day, after the lapse of thirty years!

Progress of the cause in Huntington, as may be presumed, was not made without the experience by its friends of a considerable share of obloquy and opposition. Thus, the Rev. Mr. Holliday, of the Presbyterian Church, was wont to remark of the aged disciple before alluded to, and of the late Col. Conklin, a man very highly respected, that “the Devil keeps these two individuals as *baits* to allure others into his snare.” And another pastor of the same church, Rev. Mr. Robertson, observing the Colonel in his congregation one Sunday P.M., and knowing that he had given to inquirers in his church Universalist tracts to read, took occasion to rebuke the imprudence, by saying that a man who would be guilty of such an act was “worse than a midnight assassin.” So, too, at a later time, another pastor of the same church absolutely refused to assist at the burial-service of a daughter of one of the best men in the place (late Z. B. Oakley), though his wife was a member of his church, if a Universalist minister was to take any part in it.

It was not until seventeen years after the building of the church that the friends felt able to support a minister, who [w]ould labor with them constantly as their pastor. During this long period, however, they had preaching as regularly as their means would allow. In the warmer part of the year they were supplied, at different periods, as often as once a month, or more frequently, by the late Revs. Thomas Miller, Menzies Rayner, and Shaler J. Hillyard, and Rev. Henry Lyon—all good men and true. Occasionally, by exchange or at a conference, perhaps, they enjoyed the pleasure of listening to other voices.

In 1854 arrangements were made with Rev. P. Thomas, who became the first resident Pastor of the Society, and was installed November 9. He organized the Sunday School, which is still continued in operation under the charge of Mr. W. A. Conant, formerly a Superintendent of the Orchard-street Sunday School of New York. The next pastor was Rev. S. Jenkins, whose labors commenced in November, 1856 and closed in April, 1859.

Huntington, L[ong] I[sland]

It was during the ministry of Rev. Thomas that the late widow Mary Fleet, of Oyster Bay, presented a Communion Service to the Church, and the Lord's Supper was observed at fitting times, as also during the pastorate of his successor. The Ladies' Sewing Society began its work about the same time, and is now in active operation.

Rev. H. P. Crozier became the third pastor of the parish, and was installed in July, 1859, when Dr. Sawyer preached the sermon, and Rev. Mr. Ballou gave the fellowship. The installing prayer was offered by Rev. O. B. Frothingham, and the charge was given by Rev. A. A. Livermore, [both] of the Unitarian denomination. This relation was continued till November, 1863. In May, 1864, Rev. John Savery (Unitarian) entered on the duties of pastor for six months. In January, 1865, Rev. S. C. Hayford (Universalist) became pastor, but in a few months was released, that he might accept a settlement with a larger parish. The present Pastor began his labors in August last. Those who have had homes with this people, as their ministers, are all living.

....

And there were true and loving hearts that listened to the ministry of these faithful apostles, who were so wrought up that they could not forget the interests of the cause, even to the last. One of these, the venerable Sarah Sammis, left as a token of her regard a hundred dollars, which is carefully invested, as she desired, in behalf of the Society; and another, the noblest friend of all, Zophar B. Oakley, who never faltered, but endured very much because of his religion, made provision at his death whereby the sum of five thousand dollars should be held by the Trustees of the church, and the income expended for the preaching of the Word. Thus the works of the faithful of former days live after them.

The Society has ever been small. It could not well be otherwise. The growth of the village has not been large. For respectability, integrity, and moral worth, it has never been behind the churches of other names in the town. It is hopeful still, and determined to hold up the Ark of the Covenant, not doubting that with perseverance it shall experience a reasonable prosperity.

Christian Ambassador, New York, NY, 10 Mar 1866

Transcribed on 14 Jun 2003 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY