

[Mount Vernon, Westchester Co.]

**The First Liberal Church**  
Liberal Church Founded Prior to Civil War Days  
Words of Liberal Preachers in Northern Westchester Found Echo in Organization  
of First Universalist Society in Mount Vernon, in 1855

The First Liberal Church of Mount Vernon has had a long history dating back to times before the Civil War and when the society first was founded as the First Universalist Church.

Religious liberals holding non-Calvinist ideas and desiring escape from what to them seemed the chrysalis of orthodoxy were apparently present early in the history of Westchester County. It is known that several noted Universalist preachers spoke at a Universalist church in North Salem, and their words soon found echo in the rapidly growing section, now Mount Vernon.

In 1854 a number of Universalist preaching services were conducted by the Rev. Henry Lyon in a second story room of Central Hall, Mount Vernon, and on Feb. 12, 1855, the first Universalist Society was organized and incorporated. The next year a church building was erected on the Southeast corner of Third Avenue and Fourth Street. It was dedicated Sept. 23, 1856.

**City Landmark**

This church building was a city landmark for many years and was used continuously by the First Universalist Society until 1907, when it was sold and new property purchased at 38 South Second Avenue, opposite the Public Library. The present church building was erected there that same year, occupying a commodious plot, which is now being landscaped.

The Divine Paternity Universalist Church, New York City, was greatly interested in the building of the new church and some of its members, including Mrs. Andrew Carnegie, made generous gifts. The property now is valued at \$75,000.

The Rev. Clarence R. Skinner, now professor of social Christianity at Tufts College, was the first minister called to the new pulpit on South Second Avenue.

The church was denominationally Universalist from the time of its organization until 1923, although cordial relations had been maintained for many years with Hope Unitarian Church, Yonkers, which also was the outgrowth of the preaching of eclectic, liberal and anti-orthodox ideas.

**Fail to Organize**

In 1906 certain members of Plymouth Congregational Church, Mount Vernon, under the leadership of the Rev. W. B. Allis, made an earnest but ineffectual attempt to start a local Unitarian organization. In spite of the failure of this movement, Unitarians were coming to the city constantly and by 1923, they were holding meetings in conjunction with the Unitarians in New Rochelle. They had no church building in which to worship and accordingly arrangements were made whereby the First Universalist Church became the First Liberal Church for both Universalists and Unitarians.

Maitland B. Sloat, Mount Vernon, was then president of the First Universalist Church, Dr. Samuel A. Eliot, representing the American Unitarian Association, and Dr. John Smith Lowe, representing the Universalist General Convention, took part in the inaugural exercises of the new religious venture.

[Mount Vernon, Westchester Co.]

The Rev. Dr. Walter R. Hunt, secretary of the American Unitarian Association, was instrumental in securing collaboration of the Unitarian families in the new undertaking and took an important part in the launching of the new church. The New York State Universalist Convention approved the union and gave its help.

Dr. Sayles Minister

The Rev. Dr. John Sayles, Buffalo, was called to be the first minister of the new society and served until 1928, when ill health caused his retirement. He was succeeded by the Rev. Dr. Thomas Van Ness, who occupied the pulpit for a little more than a year.

The Rev. Dr. Elmer D. Colcord was called as minister in 1930. He was educated at Tufts College, the International Young Men's Christian Association College, Princeton and Rutgers Universities. Prior to coming to Mount Vernon Dr. Colcord had been professor of psychology at the International Y.M.C.A. College, Springfield, Mass., and minister of the Universalist Church in that city, and also minister of the Unitarian Church, Trenton. N. J.

An object of attraction on the church grounds is the Wayside Pulpit, observed by many as they pass the church. This pulpit contains quotations and statements of liberalism, which are changed from week to week. Placards for the Wayside Pulpit are regularly received from the American Unitarian Association headquarters in Boston.

Wide Parish Range

The First Liberal Church has a wide geographical spread and draws to its Sunday morning and weekday services a large number from Scarsdale, Larchmont, New Rochelle, Pelham, Bronxville, Tuckhoe, Yonkers and the Bronx, as well as from Mount Vernon.

Among organizations connected with the church are a woman's league, a men's club, Church school, senior and junior young people's societies and a book study club.

The First Universalist Society, while it merged its identity with the First Liberal Church in 1923, continues to maintain its organization for legal purposes and holds occasional meetings. The society holds the deed to the property which was given to the New York State Universalist Convention some years ago and redeeded to the local group.

*The Daily Argus*, Mount Vernon, N. Y., Sat.6 Oct 1934

Transcribed on 10 Oct 2012 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester NY