

[Utica, Oneida Co. NY]

UTICA CHURCH FOUNDED 1823

Ralph M. Jones

One hundred fifteen years wrought great changes in Utica. It was a crude, bustling village in 1823. The Erie Canal was soon to be opened and this achievement was destined to bring prosperity. Men of these years were violently partisan in their politics and in their religion. Tolerance was a rare virtue. The first record of Universalist activity in Utica appears in 1823. The Rev. John S. Thompson was apparently the first clergyman to talk to the people of Utica about a God of love and the doctrine of universal salvation. Many heard him gladly because they were weary of the hell and damnation doctrines which were proclaimed by the orthodox church. He appeared in the village as an itinerant preacher but after two years' effort, the First Universalist Society of Utica was organized with Mr. Thompson as its minister. The date of the organization was November 1, 1825.

The meetings were held in the homes of members and later the town hall. Immediately, the new society was an object of attack. Persecution in the form of rotten eggs and vegetables, with occasionally a dead dog or cat dropped at the door of a Universalist home meant that these early Universalists were ostracized in Utica. This opposition, however, made the bond of fellowship within the society very strong.

The Rev. Dolphus Skinner became the joint minister of the Universalist societies in Utica, Whitestown and New Hartford. It may interest the reader to know a bit about his salary. The church in Utica raised pledges amounting to fifty dollars as its share of the minister's salary. In the following year, a brick edifice was erected, sixty feet long and forty-five feet wide at 4 Devereux Street. This building with its steeple was completed in 1830. "The Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate," which was published in Utica, in its issue dated March 13, 1830, carried the following announcement: "The new Universalist chapel in this village will be publicly dedicated to the worship of the only living and true God on Thursday, next. The sermon will be delivered by the Rev. S. R. [Stephen Rensselaer] Smith of Clinton. Ministering brethren of the order are invited to attend. It is expected that Brothers Moore, Whittemore, [Seth] Potter, [Nathaniel] Stacy and others in the vicinity, who can make it convenient, will be present."

The Rev. Dolphus Skinner founded "The Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate," one of the earliest Universalist publications. It won a large circulation in New York State and New England. Subscribers lived as far

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away as Georgia and Alabama. In this publication, he had Aaron B. Grosch¹, a printer, as a co-worker, contributing articles for the magazine as well as tending to the actual work of printing. Mr. Grosch became the third minister of the Utica church in 1832, continuing his work on "The Advocate."

Several young men, who were desirous of entering the Universalist ministry, were studied with Mr. Grosch during his pastorate. There were no liberal theological schools in this early epoch. One of these students was Edward H. [Edwin Hubbell] Chapin, who later became Dr. Chapin, the great pulpit orator produced by our denomination. For many years he was the pastor of the Church of the Divine Paternity in New York City.

In twenty years the edifice on Devereux Street was outgrown and a larger structure of stone was erected on Seneca Street, a site now occupied by the First Citizen's Bank and Trust Company. This building was occupied in 1853 and was nationally famous for the tree which grew on its tower.

As the years passed, the current turned strongly in favor of the Universalist church in Utica. It reached its zenith in the early seventies during the pastorate of Dr. A. [Abram] J. Canfield. The church proved to small to accommodate the crowds so the Sunday evening services were held in the old Utica opera house. About this time Col. Robert G. Ingersoll, the so-called atheist, delivered a series of lectures in Utica. The Universalist church, known as the Church of the Reconciliation, was the only organization which would sponsor the lectures.

Fifty years passed and the property on Seneca Street became out of date. Its location in the business section was not desirable. The offer of the Citizens' Trust Company in 1906 for the property was accepted. The Comstock home on the corner of Genesee and Tracy Streets, located in an excellent residential section, was purchased. The house was remodeled into a parish house. At the front adjoining Tracy Street, the present edifice was built and the cornerstone was laid in 1907. Dr. John Sayles was minister when the old church was sold and the new church was financed. Much credit is due to his business ability. Dr. George Cross Baner was the minister during the building period.

The Million Dollar Drive of the Universalist denomination occurred in 1919. Under the leadership of Dr. Willard C. Selleck, this church co-operated, raising somewhat over \$26,000. Contributions were made to the work of the Universalist General Convention and several local debts were paid. The balance, amounting to \$18,000, created an endowment fund for

¹ The writer of this article, Ralph M. Jones, was the wife of Rev. Grosch's daughter Emma. The surname of Rev. Grosch was spelled Grosh in contemporary sources. He was from a Universalist family in Marietta, PA.

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the local society. By the agreement with the Oneida National Bank, the principal can never be used.

To safeguard its assets to our denomination in any eventuality, the Church of the Reconciliation deeded its real estate to the New York State Convention of Universalists, retaining only the right of occupancy. Also, it named the General Convention as the legatee of its endowment funds. The income from these funds has been of immense value to the church. It may not be too much to say that this income is responsible for the continuance of the work of this society.

While Dr. Thomas J. Saunders was minister, he conceived the idea that Unitarians in the city should be invited to federate with the Universalists. This would provide them with a church home and he believed this federation would strengthen the local church. The matter was thoroughly investigated with the co-operation of the denominational leaders. The society in Utica became the Church of the Reconciliation, Universalist-Unitarian, and this federation has proven a happy arrangement. Our parishioners co-operate splendidly, feeling that they belong to both bodies.

The centennial of the society was celebrated in 1926, during the pastorate of Dr. Saunders, with appropriate exercises.

The eight ministers who have served the society in its present location are: Dr. John Sayles, Dr. George Cross Baner, Dr. Willard C. Selleck, the Rev. Leslie C. Nichols, Dr. Thomas J. Saunders, the Rev. Alfred J. Cole, Dr. Stanard D. Butler, and the Rev. Robert Killam, the present minister. All of these past ministers are living and active in the service of the Universalist cause. They have earned our gratitude and to them go our best wishes.

The writer regrets that the lack of space limits a more complete account of the career of the church in Utica. To the memory of the many unmentioned loyal Universalists who gave unstintedly of time and means to the work of this church, he extends genuine appreciation. The best monument to their memory is the fact that their work still lives.

Empire State Universalist, Cortland NY, October 1938

Transcribed on 4 Apr 2013 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY