

[Utica, Oneida Co.]

## CHURCH OF RECONCILIATION TO MARK 125TH YEAR

The Church of the Reconciliation, under pastorage of the Rev. John Stewart MacPhee, is planning to celebrate its 125th anniversary, beginning next month and continuing through May.

The congregation and minister are thinking of the past more than usual these days, for an Observer-Dispatch reporter and photographer uncovered an old, abandoned cemetery plot recently, which the church believes belongs to it. It adjoins a cemetery known as "The French Road Cemetery," to which the Universalist Society holds the deed.

The newly uncovered plot next to it was deeded to the "First Universalist Society of Whitestown" in 1817 by one Enoch Higby. That was six years before the Utica Society, or Church of the Reconciliation, was formed.

Now the Church of the Reconciliation believes it is the united representative of both groups and as such owns the second cemetery.

Miss Carrie A. Ritter, 1508 Kemble, one of the church leaders, has written a short history of the church. Mr. MacPhee is planning to have it printed in brochure form as an anniversary souvenir.

Miss Ritter notes that Universalism had been preached in this area since Aug. 30, 1805, "when the Rev. Nathaniel Stacy had an appointment at Whitestown."

He related at that time "No meeting house could be procured and no school house could hold the congregation that assembled. We were therefore compelled to occupy a barn and it was literally filled."

The society, which was organized at Whitestown, was the second in Central New York and included six other towns, of which Utica was one. The Whitestown Society became known as the New Hartford Society and built the first Universalist church west of the Hudson. It stood on "the corner of Genesee, New Hartford Road and Capron." The historian explains that churches were known as societies 100 and more years ago.

Hosea Ballou preached in Utica just one day "beside the clear, calm Mohawk, under the glorious sun and amidst the venerable trees." One of his listeners was a young man "dissatisfied with orthodoxy, "Stephen R. Smith, probably from Clinton." Two years later, after Paul Dean preached here, Smith became a Universalist and in 1818 he was made pastor of the New Hartford Society and took his place as "a very prominent minister."

The First Universalist Society of Utica was formed at a Nov. 21, 1828 meeting in the Court House by "a number of persons believing in the doctrine of God's impartial and universal love."

Forty-two names were signed to the constitution and the Rev. John S. Thompson, who had preached the Sunday before the meeting, became the

[Utica, Oneida Co.]

first Utica minister of the Universalist Church, which was built at 4 Devereux St.

Early records were destroyed by fire, and Miss Ritter finds the church was sold and the society reorganized in 1848 as the Universalist Society. Its church was built in Seneca St. where the First Bank & Trust Company stands. The present church at (1306?) Genesee was built and dedicated in 1907 "as it seemed wise to move from the business section." The name had been changed to Reconciliation many years before.

"Nathaniel Stacy had written that people were converted from orthodoxy 'of which the distinguishing point is the dogma of endless punishment' to the soul-cheering doctrine of universal reconciliation and salvation. It is easy to see why the church got its name," Miss Ritter comments.

She reports that a second society of the Church of Our Father, with a membership of 80 and a Sunday school of 100 built a church in 1891 in Bleecker St. near Nichols, but seems to have "operated only a short time."

The federation between Unitarians and Universalists was effected in 1916 and the Church of the Reconciliation now is affiliated with both denominations.

Since 1825 the society has had 29 ministers, two of whom served a second time as interim ministers. Ten of them have served in the present building.

Among outstanding leaders, Miss Ritter mentions the Rev. Aaron B. Grosh, who, as pastor, also edited and published "The Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate," an early Universalist paper.

There were then no theological schools, so Father Grosh undertook to educate young men who wished to enter the ministry.

One of his pupils was the Rev. Edwin H. Chapin, D.D., New York, "considered even by those who did not approve his doctrine as the most eloquent orator of his time," according to Miss Ritter.

She mentions the late Dr. Stannard Dow Butler as being "widely known for his scholarly attainments and knowledge of Biblical history." She credits Dr. Willard C. Selleck with raising the original endowment fund.

Another whom she singles out is the Rev. George Cross Baner, D.D., retired and living in California. Miss Ritter finds that an interstate convocation of Universalist ministers was held here as early as 1876, to "begin a record of conventions held here."

*Utica Observer-Dispatch*, Utica NY, Sun. (29?) Aug 1948

Transcribed on 1 Feb 2011 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY