

Rev. Charles Hammond

Charles Hammond was a son of Eliakim and Louisa Hammond, born around 1805. He first came to the attention of the Universalist community when as a resident of Royalton, Niagara County, he began preaching the gospel of universal salvation in the summer of 1830 in the vicinity of his home. He was granted a Letter of Fellowship by the Genesee Branch of the Western Association of Universalists on October 13 that year, which entitled him to preach in areas under their jurisdiction. He preached in several places in Niagara, Orleans and Genesee Counties before coming to Rochester around 1842. In 1843 he and some colleagues began publication of a weekly newspaper titled *Western Luminary*, and on May 28, 1843 he accepted the call to the pastorate of the First Universalist Society in the city, succeeding Rev. Jacob Chase.

Rev. Hammond presided over the Society during what must have been a very painful time for all concerned. In July of 1843 nine people formed the First Universalist Church in the City of Rochester, and in September that year the eminent "Father" Hosea Ballou of Boston preached to the congregation. But by March of 1844 the congregation had sold its building and disbanded. Only the Sabbath School, meeting in the basement of the Unitarian church under the leadership of its co-founders George Henry Roberts and John J. Van Zandt, kept Universalism alive in the city during that desolate time.

Rev. Hammond continued as editor of his embattled paper, struggling to keep it going in a highly competitive market. It seems that he was constantly on the defensive, and perhaps justifiably so. In 1843 he was deeply offended by an article in the "Universalist Union," a New York paper, in which the writer criticized the Universalist periodical market for the proliferation of short-lived papers published in small towns with insufficient financial backing that undermined the support of the older, larger papers in the state--and specifically named his "Luminary." Here are portions of his spirited retort:

You say that some of them are published 'in places little known to geography, but which are nonetheless mentioned in the Post Office Directory. True, you 'do not say, or even insinuate...that a periodical, and a good one, may not be printed in other places besides New York.' Oh no? You believe that there should be five published somewhere on the face of the earth, but as for such a place as Rochester, 'mentioned in the Post Office Directory,' you do not seem to think it able to sustain a 'really good paper'...Indeed, and what advantages would geography afford to the publication of a 'really good paper?' Will you be so kind as to inform us in your next chapter on the subject?

You seem to object to some of the names of our periodicals...This method of tearing down other's houses, without providing them with as good as you destroy, is a business the justice of which I can neither learn from your article nor by the Post Office Directory. And if Br. Sawyer will furnish me with a name for our paper less objectionable to his refined taste, I will place it before the company at their meeting in October next. It may serve for another volume.

You next affect sympathy for our losses... But...you advise our friends to withdraw their support from us, that we may die; for you do not regard our lives worth the expense they cost. You think it best that the 'old' and large periodicals should eat the little ones. Well: brother, if all our brethren were of your mind, and under the influence of your philosophy, you might be gratified.- But as it is, we see no help for you. [T]he members of our denomination will, no doubt, publish just as many papers as they please, and of just the size they please, and as long as they

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please; and we see no remedy short of despotism, growing out of privileged monopolies...Our motto is 'equal rights'...

You say that 'every failure of this kind reflects upon the whole order...But it is not so.--The denomination is not responsible for, and therefore cannot be disgraced by, individual liabilities...Now then, if our publishing business is the business of the denomination, as you contend, I shall expect that you will place the matter before the denomination in an official manner... Do you not think it would be best for the denomination to determine how many papers and books--their size, quality and price, should be published, and that the Editors should be appointed by 'the order,' with power to control?...And we believe the article holds good, that if nearly all our periodicals, say all but five, should be discontinued because they are poorly supported, then all but a favored few of our ministers should stop preaching for the same reason.

....Br. S., we shall never consent to any such doctrine, nor submit to a state of things, which, like this, would forever destroy the freedom of the press, and exclude private opinion from public examination, unless such opinion emanate from then 'best writers,' who are under pay for writing what perhaps they neither feel, nor believe...

...If we have men among us who wish to publish a paper, let them do it, or who desire to be an Editor, let them try it, and let those patronize them who choose to do so. In our opinion, if it be an indication of "self-esteem" to seek for either of these places, it is an indication of equally as great a fault to *assume the right of pronouncing judgment* upon other men's motives, who have sacrificed all they have for the advancement of religious truth.

Then in March 1845 he took offense at a column published in a Boston paper, written by Rev. John M. Austin, newly settled at Auburn, NY. No doubt still grieving over the failure of his own church a year earlier, he replied through his Luminary:

....The only difficulty which Br. Austin sees in the way of building up large and flourishing societies in Utica, Syracuse, Waterloo, Seneca Falls, Geneva, Ithaca, Canandaigua and Rochester, is to obtain a man "of decent abilities and proper moral worth." These, we may infer from his letter, are rare commodities in the vicinity of these places.... Of the other places named, we cannot speak so definitely. But of this much we are fully persuaded, that it is no uncommon thing to throw the reverses of societies onto the shoulders of the unfortunate pastor, whether he may have labored faithfully or otherwise.

One word more. The society in this city owes its misfortunes to a man who has long since left our ministry... He succeeded in inducing three or four of our best friends to purchase an old dilapidated building, poorly located, at an expense of three times its value. He soon left the city and commenced the study of law. Br. Chase was then called to the pastoral charge of the city, and by the most unwearied zeal kept the society together, but still the old debt of all the church property was worth hung over their heads. And when we came to this city, nearly every member of the society save those whose property had become involved by the transaction, were decidedly opposed to taking any measures for its redemption. They chose to occupy the house while they could, and then let it pay for itself.

Such was the result. And we have the satisfaction to believe that the Universalists in this city are now stronger than they ever were before. But we

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cannot agree with Br. Austin that a man of decent abilities and proper moral worth would find a promising location here. He would doubtless do good, but we fear the “promising” would be more pleasing than the reality itself.

Hammond continued doing what he could to get the Rochester society back on its feet, and his *Luminary* provides a view of Universalism of the time that cannot be found anywhere else. But even as he defended himself in the press, he enraged the lay proprietor of the older, larger Utica periodical the *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*, “Br.” Walker, with accusations that Walker was endeavoring to steal his subscribers. As Rev. Hammond struggled through what became his final months, Walker published increasingly angry replies that reveal what a cutthroat endeavor the newspaper business really was. When the *Western Luminary* at last ceased publication, Rev. Hammond rejected Walker’s offer to buy him out and sold his assets instead to the *Star of the West*, a paper headquartered in Ohio.

Out of work, and probably ill with the consumption that eventually ended his life, Charles Hammond shocked the entire Universalist community when he abandoned the ministry a few years later for the new Spiritualist movement. In his obituary, Rev. James H. Tuttle wrote:

When the excitement in Spiritualism commenced, he became a firm believer in that; and so great was his interest in it, together with the opposition which he encountered from former friends, that he gradually withdrew from our ministry and preached to whomsoever would listen to the new doctrines. He desired, as he often said, to be utterly disconnected from all sects; and as far as possible, he was. He wrote one of the first books that was published on the subject of Spiritualism, which had extensive circulation... So far as I know, his views on Spiritualism remained unchanged to the last moment.

Whatever difference of opinion may exist as to the wisdom of his course in withdrawing from the ministry of Universalism, or in regard to the soundness of his late views, all who knew him unite in saying that he acted in a spirit of deep sincerity, that he was an upright citizen, a good neighbor, and a christian. Thousands of Universalists will remember his preaching, and his labors for the cause in former days, with great satisfaction, and perhaps will drop a tear at the thought that they shall see him no more in this world.

Charles Hammond died July 10, 1859 in Rochester, survived by his wife Sybil and his only daughter Seraph Hamlin, who succumbed on 29 May 1863 at her home in Villanova, Chautauqua County, to the same consumption that had ended her father’s life. Perhaps Charles Hammond had placed impossible demands upon his faith—or perhaps Universalism had demanded the impossible from him. But I believe that he literally gave all he had to the cause of Universalism, so that when his parish closed and his paper failed, he had nowhere else in the movement to turn.

Karen E. Dau