

A HISTORY OF OUR CHURCH

by Octavia S. Thaxter

THIS HISTORY READ ON
JUNE 5 1944 AT 125 ANNIVERSARY
OF MINNEAPOLIS UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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Other sources for this material were: church records, notes of minutes of the meetings of Niagara Association of Universalists, and records of the annual parish meetings of the church.

Between 1817 and 1830 there was a great deal of emigration from the New England states, particularly Vermont. The destination of many of these people was the Ohio River Valley. Some, impressed by the rich farm land in Niagara County, stopped and made their homes near what is now Middleport, New York.

A mere handful of these devout Christian men, determined to bring up their families in a Christian environment and in accordance with Universalist beliefs, came together in a meeting to organize themselves into a Universalist society.

"The first time that the doctrine of this denomination was ever preached in or near Middleport, Judge Alden S. Baker procured the services of the Reverend Linus S. Everett, who preached in a little frame schoolhouse, at what was then called Ewing's Corners, half a mile south of Middleport. The text on that occasion was Acts II, 39, and the first hymn sung was, 'Come Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove!'"¹

Acts II, verse 39 reads:

And Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him."

This verse, which was read on that particular occasion, seems to reflect quite well the basic doctrine of Universalism, which centers about the belief that all men will finally be saved, because eventually, all men will accept the grace of God.

1. Sanford and Co., Illustrated History of Niagara County, 1821-1876, p. 355.

From 1833 to 1841 the society depended upon circuit preachers. They held their prayer meetings at homes, schoolhouses and even in barns. Among the early circuit riders were Reverend Linus S. Everett, Reverend Isaac Whitnal, and Reverend Luscomb Knap. Services were conducted whenever a circuit rider could be obtained.

The preacher did not always arrive on a Sunday, so meetings might be held on any day of the week. If the circuit rider happened to arrive on a Saturday afternoon, he would spend the night with one of the families, and then begin services early on Sunday morning. These services would generally last all day. If the preacher did not have further commitment on the following day, services would again be held on Monday evening. The society then might not see the circuit rider for another six to eight weeks.

These early Universalists met with a great deal of opposition from the orthodox churches, especially the Methodist and Presbyterian. Members of the latter tried to break up the meetings, sometimes resorting to sticks and stones.

"For a long time Mrs. Alden S. Baker was the only woman who would, or did, attend the Universalist meetings, and was for a long time the only female member of the society."

In October of 1832, delegates from eighteen Universalist societies throughout Western New York held a meeting at the Universalist Meeting house at York, New York.

1. Sanborn and Co., Illustrated History of Niagara County, 1821-1878, p. 355.

The organization which was formed as a result of this meeting was called the Niagara Association of Universalists. The minutes taken at this convention stated the purpose of the Niagara Association:

It is the purpose of this organization to adopt wise and suitable means for the advancement of the cause of primitive Christianity and melioration of the moral condition of mankind. It is the purpose of this organization to choose a moderator, clerk and other officers when necessary to examine the state of particular churches and societies duly represented; to give or withdraw fellowship as may be deemed necessary; to consider the conduct of its members and to reprove or rebuke as occasion may require; to appoint a committee of discipline who shall have the power of hearing complaints and of suspending ministers from fellowship; and to give and recall letters of fellowship.

In 1841, the Middleport Universalists organized their group into the First Universalist Association of Middleport. During this same year they requested and received fellowship with the Niagara Association. The group's small membership of approximately twenty people probably accounts for its hesitancy in asking for membership in the Niagara Association.

The records of the First Universalist Association of Middleport date from April 6, 1841, when a constitution was adopted and officers chosen. The Certificate of Incorporation of the church was drawn up April 29, 1841, by Elias Ransom, Niagara County Judge. The entry from the church records on April 6, 1841 state:

At a meeting of the society holden [sic] at the schoolhouse pursuant to due notice as required by law, the following persons were chosen as officers of said society as follows wit; Elijah Mather - Moderator and Alden S. Baker - Clerk. An election was held for trustees by ballot, and John Craig, Dudley Watson and Linus Spaulding were chosen as such, and on a ballot by lot the said trustees drew as follows to wit:

John Craig	3 years
Dudley Watson	2 years
Linus Spaulding	1 year

The question of a suitable house of worship was discussed and apparently decided upon at this meeting.

The requirements for membership in the association were few and quite unsophisticated. Article II of the constitution states:

Any person can become a member of this association who sustains a good moral character, is a believer in Christianity, attends on or supports its meetings and signs this constitution.

A member could withdraw from the Association, providing he submitted a notice of his withdrawal to the clerk or trustees. It is interesting to note that no member could be excluded from the Association without a trial. Article IX of the constitution states:

No member of the Association shall be excluded from the association without a fair trial, after being furnished with a copy of the charges and the name or names of his or her accuser and by a vote of two-thirds of the members present at a meeting called for that purpose.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE CHURCH

The next entry in the church records was not made until a year later, on April 15, 1842. It seems a bit strange that the activities of the Association were not recorded within the span of that year, because it was one of the most important years in the development of the church. In that same year, the building of the cobblestone church was undertaken, chiefly under the influence of another circuit preacher, the Reverend C. Hammond.

The land on which the structure was built was donated to the Association by John Craig. Craig was a prominent businessman in Middleport, who owned a rather large tract of land bordering on Main Street. A section of the Craig Purchase, as it was then called, was given to the Association as a site for the church.

The actual building of the church proved to be a tremendous task, and necessitated the complete cooperation of all the members. The man who was hired to build the cobblestone structure was Emery Smith, a mason who specialized in cobblestone architecture.

The stones which were used in the construction of the church were hauled from the shores of Lake Ontario, twelve miles to the north. An entire family would take part in gathering the stones needed for construction. About four o'clock in the morning, the family would depart from home with their team of oxen. The roads from Middleport

to the lake shore were little more than dirt paths, and travel was very slow. The women and children would gather the smooth, egg-shaped stones, and the men would sort the stones according to size. They did this by means of a flat, narrow board which had holes of varying size along it. The stones were dropped through the appropriate opening and graded accordingly. At noon the families would eat the picnic lunches that the women had prepared, and then resume their work until three or four o'clock, at which time they would begin their trip back home. Two or three carts could generally be filled in one day.

Before the actual building of the church could begin, lime for the making of mortar to be burned. Most of the lime used in the construction came from the farm belonging to Clark Northrup, a member of the church, and also from a farm south of Shelby Center in Orleans County. A huge brush fire would be started on top of one of these limestone deposits, and when the fire had diminished, the resulting lime deposits would be mixed with sand and used as mortar.

The job of laying the walls of the structure took quite a long while. The experienced mason could lay up about eighteen inches of wall on all sides in one day, but the walls then had to dry for three weeks before another eighteen inches could be applied.

The art of cobblestone construction seems to have been lost with the builders. The peculiar method in which the round stones are laid

is not duplicated by present day masons. In recent years, workers called to patch the sides of the building have found it impossible to exactly match the original construction.

The completed structure was entirely cobblestone, except for the twin, wooden pillars and double doors on the front of the building. The church was appraised by the master builder and trustees at \$5,000.00. The church in Middleport is an exact replica of another Universalist Church in Chittenden, Vermont.

The Universalists took great pride in their new church, and church records reveal numerous improvements which were constantly being made to enhance the appearance of the structure. Today one might think that the early church was rather plain and severe in appearance, but the Universalists of 1842 did not approve of an extremely ornate house of worship.

The interior of the church was constructed almost entirely from white pine. The pews, which were also made out of pine, had high backs and doors on the sides so that the children could not slip out and make a disturbance during the service. The windows were clear panes of glass, covered with white curtains. There were no stained glass windows until 1915.

There was no central heating system, and the building was heated by a single coal stove, which stood at the back of the church. During

the cold winter months, the women would bring footwarmers or heated soapstones with them to keep warm.

At a meeting on April 15, 1842, the trustees were authorized to fix a day for the dedication of the church. They also chose to invite Reverend Linus Everett to dedicate the church, since he had been the first preacher to bring the Universalist doctrine to Middleport. A finance committee also decided that a collection should be taken on the day of dedication to defray contingent expenses.

At a meeting on March 14, 1843, the master builder and trustees were authorized to appraise the pews and offer them to the highest bidder above that figure. The appraisals were governed by approximity to the pulpit, and ranged from forty to one hundred and thirty-five dollars. Not all pews were paid in full in cash, and many gave their notes for part. Some rented their pews for sums ranging from about four to ten dollars for the year. There were 58 pews. 30 were sold, and seven rented. It was also decided that since there was no pulpit committee, the trustees should supply the desk with preaching.

PUBLIC REACTION TO THE CHURCH

Public reaction to the new church was not altogether favorable. A letter to the editor, which appeared in a Middleport newspaper shortly after the church was built, expressed the sentiments of those opposed to the Universalist teaching. The article read:

To the Editor:

I see by the paper that the Universalists have built a church in Middleport. Even tho [sic] I understand some of the most influential people are members, I think it is a shame to allow these people to have a church in our community. If they do not believe that some people will go to hell, how can we ever convince sinners in the hands of an angry God to repent, and keep out of hell? Let us have more fire and brimstone sermons and not less, is my belief. I prophesy that within a year the Lord will become so angry against the Universalists that he will cause lightning to strike, and burn down their church.

Yours truly,
A Firm Believer¹

Most of the opposition, as mentioned before, came from the Methodist and Presbyterian churches. They attacked the Universalist philosophy and called the members heretics. The philosophy which was attacked by these groups was set forth by Hosea Ballou, oftentimes called the philosopher of American Universalism.

1. This is from a copy of the original newspaper article. Neither the original copy or the date of publication can be found.

Ballou gave to the Universalists their first consistent and complete philosophy in his book, Treatise on Atonement published in Vermont in 1804. The Treatise completely rejected the theory of total human depravity, endless punishment in hell, the doctrine of the Trinity and the miracles. He found instead scriptural warrant for faith in man's potential goodness and found and proclaimed a God of infinite love. The only Trinity proclaimed by the Universalists was that of faith, hope and love.¹

Such opposition apparently did not stifle the spread of Universalism, and the Association continued to grow in membership and in importance in the community.

1. Emerson Lalone, Universalism and the Universalist Church, p. 5.

At the 1841 meeting of the Niagara Association held in Ridgeway, the Middleport Association was received into fellowship. Among the ministers present are listed L. Knapp and Chas. Hammond of Royalton. Liscomb Knapp died later this same year and was buried in Mt. Ridge Cemetery at Royalton.

In 1848 the Niagara Association went on record as opposing the establishing of a theological seminary on the grounds that a seminary is not for Christianity, but for theory and sectarianism, the influence of which must be to divide human hearts; giving greater prominence to the growing aristocracy of denomination and greater degradation to the mass of the people. "RESOLVED: that we will advocate and support a republican education that shall reach to the mass of mind - develop the whole man - harmonize his nature - strengthen his faculties and make him one with himself, one with his kind and one with his God, in the spirit of pure religion undefiled before Him." Perhaps it should be mentioned here that at least fourty-four institutions of higher learning have been founded by Universalists, all of which are liberal and undenominational.

While we are on the topic of schools, the Association records show that one of the more famous ministers of the denomination, Rev. D. C. Tomlinson, served at Middleport 1865-66, and while here established our Sunday School. Later, a Sunday School library was established.

In 1870, the Middleport Church reported to the Association a church building valued at \$8,000. with a church bell, the only one in the village, also the first church organ in the village. This organ was in the large niche at the rear of the church. The choir was also in this space.

In 1877 the Middleport church reported itself as free from debt, and with \$5,000. at interest - regular preaching every Sunday with average attendance of 125. The changes were credited to the earnest labors of Rev. A. U. Hutchins, and to the Ladies Social Circle.

In 1879 the parsonage on State Street was built.

During the pastorate of Rev. Thaddeus C. Druley, there was born at Middleport, Harriet Evans Druley, who later became a Universalist Minister, and in 1954 retired at Springfield, Ohio, after serving in Universalist parishes for 50 years. The first of these women ministers was Olympia Brown, who, in 1863 became the first woman in America to be ordained in a regularly constituted religious body. If my memory serves me, there were at least 30 of regularly ordained women ministers. Today, our women are again entering the ministry.

In 1892, the Middleport Universalists celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the dedication of the church building. The Niagara Association held its annual meeting in the Middleport Church, and no doubt assisted in dedicating the first parish hall in the village, although I find no record of such dedication.

This was the building for many years known as Social Hall, which stood on part of the land now occupied by the Post Office. There is a note in the records that supper was served in Social Hall.

In 1899 new hymn books were purchased, using part of the money of the Adeline Zimmerman Memorial Fund.

In 1902 extraordinary repairs seem to have been made to church building, although except for a new organ (\$1175.), new pews (\$616.), Social Hall shingled (\$139.74), there is nothing to explain the Church repairs (\$2,182.76). It could have been a new heating plant, as I believe it was about that time that the change from hot air to steam was made. The organ and the pews are still in use.

It was during the pastorate of Rev. I. V. Lobdell that our beautiful stained glass windows were placed in the church edifice. Also during his pastorate, church membership was the highest in the history of the church - 285 members. Rev. Lobdell was with us for seven years. We would willingly have kept him longer, but realized that he was destined for greater things than we could offer.

During 1924, C. Clare Blauvelt was ordained at Middleport, but again, the record does not say exactly when. This was the second ordination of a pastor here. The first occurred during 1867 when A. A. Leighton was ordained.

During Rev. Blauvelt's pastorate the Sheldon property next south of the church building was purchased, and the Parish Hall was built and dedicated to the service of the community.

During Rev. Clarence Cowing's pastorate, the Middleport Free Library was organized, and found it's first home in our Parish House.

During the pastorate of Rev. Donald Evans, and for many years thereafter, the Boy Scouts used the basement of the Parish Hall as their headquarters.

When the school was centralized and became Royalton-Hartland, the Parish Hall was divided into two classrooms, which were used for several years.

During the pastorate of Rev. Clifford R. Stetson, the centennial of the church building was celebrated. Programs of this celebration have been preserved, and are on view in the anteroom of the church.

During the pastorate of Rev. Charles Wood, the 114th anniversary of the building of the church was celebrated May 22, 1955, by a home-coming Sunday. In place of the usual story, Rev. Wood told the children the story of how the church was built, and how the children of the parish helped in sizing the stones.

In place of the sermon, Alden Stuart, descendant of Alden S. Baker spoke of his boyhood in Middleport, and of how the school today looks to the church to provide the moral and spiritual values which the school cannot provide.

Homer McOmber, now a teacher at Corning, New York, told of how the church pastor and his teachers had prevailed upon him to continue through school and the University, and that the money he had earned as janitor of this church was nearly all that he had when he arrived at

St. Lawrence University, having hitch-hiked a ride on a truck loaded with barrels of tar. He said that these early influences have helped him to prevail upon many boys to finish their high school education; that people, when they give to a church do not know how far reaching may be the good brought about by their donation.

Octavia S. Thaxter
Church Historian

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CONSTITUTION OF THE FIRST UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

Preamble

Whereas the Christian religion is eminently adopted to man as a social being and whereas the laws of this commonwealth permit us to unite in social compact, therefore we the undersigned agree to unite ourselves into an association for the support and enjoyment of public religious worship according to the dictates of our consciences. Therefore we do adopt the following constitution:

Article I

This society shall be called and known as the Middleport Universalist Association.

Article II

Any person can become a member of this association who sustains a good moral character, is a believer in Christianity, attends on or supports its meeting and signs this Constitution. Any person attending stately on and supporting its meetings for one year may then have a vote in the election of its officers.

Article III

The officers of this association shall consist of a moderator, a clerk and three trustees each of whom shall be a member of this association.

Article IV

The moderator and clerk shall be chosen *viva voce* by a majority of the members present at a meeting held for such purpose the moderator first, and secondly the clerk who shall respectively hold their offices one year from the date of this election.

Article V

It shall be the duty of the moderator to call the meeting to order and to preside over the deliberations of such meetings, to receive the votes for all officers to be elected and to certify under his hand and seal the names of the persons elected trustees and to sign all other proceedings deemed necessary by a majority of the members present.

Article VI

It shall be the duty of the clerk to attend all meetings called by the officers of the association; to act as secretary of the same and to provide and keep a book of record of the association and together with the moderator certify under his hand the names of the trustees elected and to sign all other proceedings deemed necessary by the association; to hand over to his successors in office all records appertaining to the association immediately on the expiration of his office.

Article VII

The trustees shall be elected by written or printed ballots by a majority of the members at a meeting called for that purpose. Who shall hold their offices for three years, but those first chosen shall be divided by lot into three divisions - number one, two, and three. Number one shall go out of office at the expiration of one year, number two at the expiration of two years, and so on; so that one third of the whole number shall be chosen annually.

Article VIII

It shall be the duty of the trustees to transact all the legal and temporal business of the association to purchase land on which to build a house of worship, to superintend and transact all business appertaining to such building, to collect and receive and disburse all moneys belonging to the association, to call meetings of the association when a majority of the trustees shall deem it necessary.

Article IX

Any member may withdraw from this association at any time by giving notice thereof in writing to the clerk or either of the trustees and no member shall be excluded from the association without a fair trial after being furnished with a copy of the charges and the name or names of his or her accuser and by a two-thirds vote of the members present.

Article X

The trustees shall procur and use a common seal and no person shall be eligible to the office of trustee who shall not have been a stated attendant on the worship of said association and contributed to its support for one year previous to his election.

Article XI

There shall be a regular annual meeting of the association held on the second Tuesday of March in each and every year for the purpose of electing officers and of transacting all other business appertaining to and deemed necessary by the association, due notice of which shall be given by the clerk or by a majority of the trustees in writing at least one month previous and posted in at least three public places in the village of Middleport.

Article XII

No part of this constitution shall be altered or repealed except by a majority vote of two-thirds of the members present at a meeting called for that purpose, and not till after notice shall have been given of such repeal or alteration at the previous regular annual meeting of the association.