

Historical Tidbits, Including History from Lawrence I. Grinnell's "A Century of Unitarian History in Ithaca: 1865–1965"

Edited by Fred Conner

Rev. Samuel J. May—an abolitionist leader, champion of the Underground Railroad, and Unitarian minister—helped to found Ithaca's first Unitarian congregation and officiated at its inaugural service on October 15, 1865, which was held in the Ithaca Town Hall.

Originally the church went by the name Church of Christian Unity. The name First Unitarian Society of Ithaca (FUSIT) was adopted in 1871.

Ezra Cornell and Andrew D. White, founder and first president of Cornell University, respectively, were early FUSIT attendees.

The first church building, completed in 1873, was located at the corner of Terrace Place and East Buffalo Street—just two blocks east of the current building. The original building was frame construction with a parlor and Sunday School room in the basement. Construction cost was about \$13,500, or \$276,000 in today's (2015) dollars. The minister was Dr. Rufus P. Stebbins, who previously was the first president of Meadville Theological Seminary and president of the American Unitarian Association.

A story found in Virgil Morse's book of anecdotes relates that the church spire was struck by lightning, which caused a local Orthodox pastor to declare that the incident was a direct visitation of divine wrath upon the heretics (Unitarians). Within two weeks, however, another storm arose and smashed the steeple of the Orthodox Church all to smithereens.

Rev. Alfred E. Goodnough, installed as minister in 1885, boasted that in his first year the size of the congregation doubled. He left in 1887 to become minister of the First Unitarian Congregational Church of Brooklyn, where he died in the pulpit having just concluded his first sermon.

On January 30, 1893, the original church building burned when an oil stove was tipped over. Immediately thereafter, plans to rebuild commenced. A leading local merchant handed the minister a "generous sum" with a smile, saying, "for your building fund."

Construction of the present church building, at the corner of North Aurora and East Buffalo streets, commenced in 1893 and was completed the following year, at a cost of \$26,000 (or about \$738,000 in 2015 dollars). William Henry Miller, a renowned local architect, donated his services in memory of his mother. The original design called for a low steeple, but a formidable church member insisted on a "prominent spire" so that college students would be sure to see it from their East Hill and South Hill campuses.

Ralph Norman Helverson served as minister from 1942–1959. In 1946, Frank Eldridge was hired as organist, which position he fulfilled until his death in December 1993. On November 19, 1975, the congregation's new, custom-built Wolff organ was installed—and today that organ is dedicated to Frank Eldridge's memory.

In 1949, extensive alterations and improvements were made to the sanctuary. In 1952, a three-story addition to house FUSIT's church-school program was added.

FUSIT's first part-time director of religious education (DRE), Mary Sumner, was appointed in 1957 to oversee an enrollment of about two hundred children. RE teachers were recruited from among the society's membership to support the active church-school program. In 1958 enough money was raised to purchase the large house to the north—now referred to as the Parish House—to accommodate the growing religious-education program.

In 1975 Lois Ecklund was hired as DRE. Under Lois the RE program expanded greatly and for a while exceeded two hundred and fifty children. Lois retired in 2005 as FUSIT's longest-serving DRE.

During its first one-hundred years the First Unitarian Society of Ithaca was served by twenty-one ministers, whose average tenure was about five years.

Rev. John “Jack” Taylor arrived in 1971 and served until his retirement in 1996. With twenty-five years of service, he is FUSIT's longest serving minister. The membership grew to over five hundred during his tenure. During the mid 1990s, the large number of adults and children participating in Sunday services and programs resulted in two “identical” Sunday services being held in the sanctuary, one after the other.

In 1990 FUSIT initiated a \$1.2 million addition-and-renovation project to connect the Parish House to the church proper, thereby creating additional RE space and enabling movement between the two buildings without going outdoors.

In 2000 the adjacent Acrographics building, at 208 E. Buffalo Street, was offered for sale to the church. \$515,000 was raised to complete the purchase and initiate renovations, while the total cost came to over \$830,000. In 2024 that building was retrofitted with high-efficiency heat pumps for heating and cooling, and the old fossil-fuel-burning heating system was removed.