

## **Church Historical Tidbits: Including history from Lawrence I. Grinnell's "A Century of Unitarian History in Ithaca: 1865—1965"**

Samuel J. May, Abolitionist Leader and head of the Underground Railway helped to found the Church in Ithaca and officiated at the first service, Oct 15, 1865 which was held in the Town Hall.

According to Carl Sandburg's Life of Lincoln, the origin of the famous phrase used by Lincoln "of the people, by the people and for the people" has been traced to Rev. May; however, the phrase is also found in Unitarian minister Theodore Parker's 1858 address on Slavery which according to historians was known to have been read by Lincoln.

For a period the official name was : Church of Christian Unity; the name First Unitarian Society of Ithaca was adopted in 1871.

Ezra Cornell and Andrew D. White, founder and first president of Cornell University were early attendees. The first church building was completed in 1873 located at Terrace Place just up the hill on East Buffalo with Dr. Rufus P. Stebbins as minister... Cost; \$13,500 in today's (2015) dollars based on consumer price indices would be approximately \$276,000. Stebbins previously was the first president of Meadville Theological Seminary and president of the American Unitarian Association.

The original building was frame construction with a parlor and Sunday school room in the basement.

A story found in Virgil Morse's book of anecdotes relates that the church spire was struck by lightning which caused a local pastor to declare that the incident was a direct visitation of divine wrath upon the heretics. However, within two weeks 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 First Unitarian Congregational Church of Brooklyn where he died in the pulpit having just concluded his first sermon.

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

The present church was built in 1893 and completed in 1894 at a cost of \$26,000 or in today's (2015) dollars: \$738,000. William Henry Miller, architect donated his services in memory of his mother. The original plan called for a low steeple, but a prominent member insisted on a "prominent spire" so that students would be sure to see it.

Ralph Norman Helverson served as minister from 1942-1959. In 1946 Frank Eldridge was hired as organist where he served until his death in 12/13/93. The present organ is dedicated to Frank.

In 1949, extensive alterations and improvements were made to the Sanctuary and in 1952 a three-story addition to house the church school was added.

Our first part-time DRE, Mary Sumner, was appointed in 1957 to oversee an enrollment of about 200 children—“many excellent teachers were recruited from our membership to support an active church school program”

In 1958 monies were raised to purchase the adjoining building now referred to as the Parish House which was intended for religious education.

During the first 100 years First Unitarian Society of Ithaca was served by 21 ministers who whose average stay approximated 5 years. On Nov 19, 1975 the new Wolff organ was dedicated.

1975 the original roofing tiles were removed and replaced with the 20 yr asphalt shingles that were finally replaced in 2010 (a mere 35 years later).

Jack Taylor arrived in 1971 and served until his retirement in 1996. With 25 years in service he is our longest serving minister. The membership grew to over 500 during his tenure.

In 1975 Lois Ecklund was hired as DRE. Under Lois the RE program expanded greatly and for a while exceeded 250 children. Lois retired in 2005 s our longest serving DRE.

During this interim the church in 1990 initiated a 1.2 million addition/renovation connecting the Parish House to the church proper and creating additional RE spaces. Church services were held at the Racker Center in Ulysses for a church year until the facility was ready to be dedicated in 1992.

In 2000 the old Acrographics building next door at 208 E. Buffalo was offered for sale to the church. \$515,000 was raised to complete the purchase and initiated renovations. Total cost came to \$834,000.