

CHRONOLOGY OF THE UNITARIAN AND UNIVERSALIST CHURCHES IN PORTSMOUTH, N.H.  
compiled by Lawrence R. Craig

The Unitarian-Universalist Church of Portsmouth, N.H., was formed on January 26, 1947, by a vote to merge the South Church (Unitarian) and the Church of Christ (Universalist) into one corporate body. Previous to this date, in May and June of 1945, the two parishes decided to federate, and on August 20, 1945, voted to call the Reverend William W. Lewis ~~as~~ minister of the federated church.

The South Church and Parish

The South Parish was originally a part of the first church established in Portsmouth. The earliest settlement within the present limits of Portsmouth was made in 1623, and the first services held here were those of the Church of England, for which a chapel and parsonage was erected prior to 1636. It was located on Pleasant St., on the site of the former South Church parsonage. Rev. Richard Gibson was the first minister. He remained until 1642. With the union of the Maine and New Hampshire settlements with the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Puritan element predominated. After the departure of Mr. Gibson, various ministers supplied at the chapel, but none were ordained.

A new meeting-house (not a chapel) was built in 1658 at the South Mill Dam, and an effort made to settle a minister. Rev. Joshua Moodey began his ministry in that year, but was not ordained until 1671. A church of nine members was organized in 1671, called the Church of Christ in Portsmouth. It is from this church organization that the North and South Parishes are descended.

In 1711 the town voted to build a new meeting-house on the northeast corner of the Glebe Land (site of the present North Church). Residents of the South End, in the neighborhood of the old meeting-house, did not want to move so far north; and a division in the parish resulted. However, the new meeting-house was built in 1712; and in January of 1713 the minister, Rev. Nathaniel Rogers, was directed to preach in the new edifice. He did so, taking with him the church records and silver. The residents of the South End, led by Capt. John Pickering, took measures to maintain a church at the old meeting-house, and called the Reverend John Emerson of New Castle to be their minister. The dispute lasted for another year, and in 1714 the Provincial Assembly divided the town into the North and South Parishes, both being equally entitled to town taxes, the North Parish being adjudged the Glebe Land, being in the majority.

In 1731 the South Parish built a new meeting-house on Meeting House Hill. This was known as the Old South Church, and was used until the completion of the present Stone Church in 1826. (Dedicated February 15, 1826)

During the ministry of the Reverend Samuel Haven, 1752-1806, the roots of liberalism were felt in the South Church and were continued to their fulfillment under the Reverend Nathan Parker, 1808-1833. The South Church became Unitarian in 1820.

The Universalist Church and Society

Seeds of Universalism were first planted in Portsmouth by John Murray in 1773; and in 1777 a group was organized, being the first liberal church, as such, to be established in Portsmouth. Their first meeting-house was built in 1784 on Vaughan St.; and in 1808 a beautiful new edifice was erected on Pleasant St. The Reverend Hosea Ballou was minister from 1809 to 1815, and while here wrote his famous "Treatise on the Atonement", the first outline of Unitarian theology to be published in this country.

The old church was destroyed by fire in 1896; and the brick church, familiar to many of us, was built the following year. This church was burned on January 11, 1947, almost two years following the federation of the two parishes. This prompted the immediate merger that forms our present church organization.

L.R. Crary

NOTES ON THE UNIVERSALIST CHURCH of Portsmouth, N.H.

The Universalist Church of Portsmouth is one of the oldest of this denomination in the country.

Rev. John Murray, the founder of Universalism in America, came to Portsmouth for the first time in 1773. He was, in a sense, the founder of the Portsmouth parish. Mr. Murray came to America from England in 1770.

Mr. Murray came to Portsmouth regularly from 1773 until long after the Portsmouth church and parish was firmly established.

The Universalists of Portsmouth met first in a school house on Market St (near the site of G.B. French & Co); and later used the old Sandemanian Meeting-house on Pleasant St (cor. of Richmond).

Rev. Noah Parker was the first minister, and the Church was gathered in 1777.

In 1784 they built their own first church-building on Vaughan St. (This building was about where the Bagger Garage is at the present time.)

On June 18, 1793 the parish was incorporated as the Universalist Society of Portsmouth, N.H.

In July, 1794, a church organization was established.

In 1807, a new church building was built on the site of the present church. At the time of its erection, it was one of the finest and largest church buildings in New England. Its architecture was of the finest, and showed the influence of Samuel MacIntyre of Salem. It was built the same year as the present St. John's Church, but was completed and opened first. If it had been built of brick or stone instead of wood, it might not have been completed so soon, but perhaps would have survived to the present day. It was renovated and altered inside in 1856-7. This church became one of the leading churches of the city, but during the latter part of the nineteenth century it came upon hard times, and in 1896 was just beginning to revive, and money was being raised to make necessary repairs and improvements.

On March 28, 1896, the old church was destroyed by fire, and the present brick church was erected the same year.

The bell was originally cast by Paul Revere for the new church in 1807. It was damaged in the fire, and was recast by the Blake Bell Co. in 1896.

It is interesting to note that Mr. William Blake who started the Blake Bell Co. was originally a partner of Paul Revere, and in 1822 formed a partnership under the name of Boston Copper Co.; which in 1829 was divided into the Blake Bell Co. and the Henry Hooper & Co. The Boston Copper Co. made the bell in the South Church tower in 1828.