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*The Story of the  
First Unitarian Church  
of Worcester*

*upon the occasion of the 225th Anniversary of the  
founding of the Second Parish*

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*By  
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February, 2010*

The celebration of our young nation's 56<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1831 in Worcester, Massachusetts was a dignified affair, with one formal procession leading to Old South and one to the Second Parish church. A service and grand dinner followed with music, an oration, and a reading of the Declaration of Independence. Twelve years later, the tone of celebration included clamor, and in the exuberance of ringing the Second Parish's bell, the bell was cracked and had to be sent to be recast. The 1853 recasting was the bell's fourth.

Paul Revere had cast the bell first for the Second Parish's new building. It had cracked soon after it was hung in 1798, and had been recast. In 1829, the bell was cast again, larger, at 2,300 pounds, and hung in the steeple of the new building on Court Hill. A fire demolished that building in 1849, and the bell fell through the ruins and broke apart. The 1853 even larger casting survived, and still hangs in the Second Parish steeple. Its most dramatic sounding being during the 1938 hurricane when it tolled hauntingly through the sounds of that tempest as the steeple rocked for fifteen minutes. When the debris was sorted, all that remained of the sanctuary was a scarred pulpit, and the loyal bell, intact.

The technique of casting a large bell is complicated, even mysterious. Details of alloy, design, and timing of pour and cure, each determine a bell's voice and durability. The hanging of the bell and how it is struck also affect these things. Each recasting adds material, and varies the geometry. So, is Second Parish's bell still a Paul Revere bell? It includes the original material, serves the same parish, and each new casting replaces its predecessor in a deliberate and honest descent. Second Parish is not identical to the church our first minister, The Rev. Aaron Bancroft, served. But it is indeed the same parish, with added alloy and a developing voice.



## THE FIRST CHURCH AND THADDEUS MACCARTY

In 1719, Worcester's first church was organized and built on the common, where the Worcester City Hall now stands. It was wholly supported by town taxes, and the minister was paid by the town. Attendance was mandatory.

The third pastor of that church was Thaddeus Maccarty. He had graduated from Harvard in 1739, and began his ministry with a short stay in Kingston, Massachusetts. The Great Awakening of strict Calvinism was spreading to America through the fiery preaching of George Whitefield. Maccarty invited Whitefield to his pulpit against the wishes of his parishioners, who were opposed to such excitement and the "strange things" that happened when Whitefield preached. The parishioners expressed their disapproval by barring the church doors on the day that the guest was scheduled, and Maccarty responded by resigning. His farewell sermon, based on such scripture as: "... after my departure shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock." (Acts, 20:29) was extremely angry.

Maccarty was called to the Worcester church as its third pastor in 1747 and served there for thirty seven years. The vote to select him was overwhelming, but its background stormy. President John Adams once wrote to Aaron Bancroft that although Maccarty was a Calvinist, he was no bigot. However, there was concern about his tolerance for "itinerancy", perhaps out of anxiety over whom he might invite into his pulpit. Meanwhile, Arminianism, the idea that faith and good works rather than predestination determined salvation, was the prevailing belief among the town meeting, who would in fact hire and pay the minister. Religious conflicts were not the sole stress of these troubled times.

Rumors of an impending French invasion distracted Worcester in 1747. Indian unrest disturbed and frightened the settlement. There was a standing militia, and others called up for urgent threats. In 1757 when the French laid siege to Fort William Henry, the people of Worcester cried

that the country had been "betrayed by the English". And most memorably, the war of Independence occurred during Maccarty's pastorate.

The colonial resistance to British rule in Worcester was organized as The American Political Society in 1773. They were opposed in town meeting and in the church by the Loyalists. Nevertheless, when seventy eight minutemen set out for Concord in April of 1775, they were blessed by a prayer from Thaddeus Maccarty. A Loyalist himself, he remained bravely in his pulpit as members of his church, and neighboring clergy, abandoned Worcester to spend the war in Canada. He was present to request Isaiah Thomas to read aloud the Declaration of Independence when a rider brought it to Worcester.

Following the war, the congregation slowly reassembled itself, although memories of divided loyalty remained. Maccarty was apparently beloved by his congregation, perhaps because of his seemingly contradictory character. He was known for day long sermons detailing the tortures awaiting sinners. Yet he wrote gently about Bathsheba Spooner who was hanged for conspiring in her husband's murder. He continued as minister of the church until he became ill and it was necessary to find another pastor to help him.



#### AARON BANCROFT

In Aaron Bancroft's words:

“In July 1783, the town of Worcester, then existing as one parish, voted to hear candidates with the design of settling a colleague pastor with the Rev. Mr. Maccarty, who was at this time suffering under great bodily infirmity. I was the first candidate invited to officiate under the above resolve, and Worcester was the first place in which I considered myself as preaching in view of settlement. In September, I completed my first engagement. Mr. Maccarty so far recovered his health as to resume his professional duties and continued to perform them till the commencement of the next summer. In July, 1784, he was called from his labours on earth to his account in heaven. In October of that year, and in January of the next, I preached in compliance with the invitation of the town. The individuals, who were desirous of retaining me as their minister, and in the apprehension that unanimity could not be obtained in my favor, in February 1785, proposed to the town that I should be ordained as a minister of the gospel in Worcester, that the members of the society, who were not satisfied with my views of Christian doctrine, should have the exclusive privilege of introducing a colleague acceptable to them; and that the salary of both ministers should be paid from the town treasury. In a legal meeting the town refused to comply with this proposition.....”

“A voluntary association was formed and separate worship was held in the Court House, where for years we continued to assemble..... On the first day of February, 1786, I was ordained, and every member of the ordaining council is now in his grave.....our society has existed but forty two years. It originated from a difference of opinion among the inhabitants of this place, on the Calvinistic and Arminian creeds. Questions respecting the Divine Unity were not then agitated, and among those who separated, I am not sure there was more than one Unitarian..... It became necessary to build a house for public worship, and the usual house of worship.”

“The revolutionary war had then closed; a paper currency no longer circulated; the products of the farm had greatly diminished in price; creditors demanded their dues; taxes, imposed by the Commonwealth lay on the people with an oppressing weight; the whole town of Worcester then formed but one legal parish; and the members of the new society paid their proportion of the salary of its minister: nor were they relieved from this burden till they obtained an Act of incorporation. To meet the expense of building our house of worship, humble as it is, under these

embarrassments, it became necessary that the pastor, for several years, should relinquish no inconsiderable part of his small stipend.”

Aaron Bancroft was born in 1755, and graduated from Harvard in 1778. He ministered to a Congregational mission in Nova Scotia for three years before coming to Worcester, which he later remembered as having given him a chance to “exercise the powers of [his] own mind”. After his first year as pastor of the Second Parish, Aaron married Lucretia Chandler, who was described as being a beauty with great vitality. The ceremony was performed by one of the parishioners, because due to Aaron's religious radicalism and Lucretia's family's Royalist loyalty no other clergy would participate. Her father had fled the colonies, and most of his younger children were eventually left in Lucretia's care. Lucretia herself bore thirteen children, one of whom was the historian George Bancroft. Financial hardship, isolation from fellow clergy, and great family responsibilities did not seem to daunt Aaron. There may have been only one Unitarian among “those who separated”, but Bancroft gradually brought his flock around to acceptance of both salvation by works, and Unitarianism. Eventually, in 1792, he was welcomed into the Worcester County Association of Ministers.

1792 also was the year that the Second Parish's first meeting house was completed. The land was donated by two of Lucretia's brothers and Bancroft sacrificed a third of his salary to help defray building costs. The building was 60 by 50 feet, with 61 pews on the first floor which were sold to subscribers.

The idea of a formal Unitarian organization to publish Unitarian ideas was developed in 1824 by a group of laymen in Boston. Channing had given his “Baltimore Sermon in 1821, setting forth Unitarian principles of free will (as opposed to predestination) and the human nature of Jesus. In 1822 “an association of gentlemen belonging to the Second Congregational Society of Worcester gathered up and published a collection of Bancroft's Sermons under the title *“Sermons On Those Doctrines Of The Gospel And On Those Constituent Principles Of The Church, Which Christian Professors Have Made The Subject Of Controversy.”* Twenty four sermons are included arguing in Bancroft's clear and accessible language the various points that then defined Unitarianism. When the American Unitarian Association was formally constituted in 1825, Aaron Bancroft was chosen as its president. He was then seventy years old. He wrote in his sermon commemorating his 50 years in ministry to the parish in 1836, “I believe...that I have never uttered a sentiment from the pulpit, either in a sermon, or in a prayer, inconsistent with the Unitarian doctrine.”

In addition to his fifty years in the Second Parish pulpit, his historical interests led him to write a biography of George Washington, and to be an incorporator of the American Antiquarian Association. That society arranged, when he was 77, for a portrait to be painted of him, a copy of which hangs in the Second Parish but alas, does not reveal his distinctive costume of knee-breeches and hose. Our companion portrait of Lucretia shows that her smile and dark hair graced her long past her youth.



#### ALONZO HILL and NEW UNITARIAN CHURCHES

Alonzo Hill was ordained as junior minister of the Second Parish in 1827, to serve under Aaron Bancroft. Attendance had increased enough to make a second pastor necessary, and a newer, larger building as well. Land on Court Hill was purchased from Isaiah Thomas, next to the courthouse where early Second Parish services had been held, and as Hill said, on ground made sacred by the first pulpit bible in America having been printed there. The new building was finished in 1829.

The cost of the land, building, and interior was offset by the sale of pews, which were then assessed a yearly fee to pay for operating the church. The interior included, on either side of the pulpit, one of a pair of twelve foot high wooden tablets, together listing the Ten Commandments.

Alonzo Hill seems to have been a cheerful and warmly friendly man. When Aaron Bancroft died in 1839 Hill's funeral oration spoke of Bancroft as "remarkable beyond any man I have ever known, for his deep-seated abhorrence of anything like mental slavery." He revered Aaron Bancroft and maintained his beliefs so loyally that during his twenty eight years in the pulpit he was increasingly characterized as "conservative". Unitarianism was changing rapidly, but Hill was not.

A group of strongly abolitionist parishioners from the Second Parish, seeking a more liberal church, dedicated The Church of the Unity in 1846, and installed Edward Everett Hale as their minister. Hill always maintained that the division was wise.

"Look up and not down, look forward and not back, look outward and not in, and lend a hand." That motto was first published by Hale in a story called "*Ten Times One is Ten*" which narrated the many ways that good deeds multiply. The theme was so popular that it inspired many Lend-A-Hand clubs, including one at the Second Parish.

Hale was pastor at the church of the Unity for ten years, and then served a Unitarian church in Boston for the rest of his pastorate. In 1903 he became chaplain to the U.S. Senate. Hale was a prolific writer who published sixty books, the most famous of which was "*The Man without a Country*". His works varied widely from serious essays to science fiction. Several matched those of his sister Lucretia's "*Peterkin Papers*" in comic silliness. Although best known as a writer, he was active in anti-slavery and public education causes. He said "I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything but I can do something. What I can do, I can do, I should do, and with the help of God I will do."

The founding of the Church of the Unity prompted the Second Parish to distinguish itself as "The First Unitarian Church". Then in 1852 a third Unitarian church, "The Free Church", was organized by a group of men wanting to emulate that of Theodore Parker in Boston and became Worcester's most radically liberal church. The members felt a need for a "prophetic" church which engaged actively in social causes. Thomas Wentworth Higginson was chosen as their pastor.

Higginson was a follower of Parker, and an ardent abolitionist (who felt that dissolving the union might be necessary). He was forced to resign from his first pulpit and spent several years in active civil disobedience. As pastor of The Free Church he vigorously preached and supported abolition, temperance, labor rights, and women's rights. He left Worcester in 1861 for military service, and became a colonel in the 1st S. Carolina Volunteers.....a company of freed slaves. He wrote a fine account of that service: "*Army Life in a Black Regiment*."

Injured in 1864, he did not return to any pulpit but spent a career writing and publishing. He is known for his correspondence with Emily Dickinson, and his publication of her poems. The Free Church in Worcester was his church, and did not survive long after he left it.

In 1849, a fire devastated the twenty year old Second Parish building. The Commandment panels, the Isaiah Thomas pulpit bible, draperies, the clock, and a finial which needed gilding had been removed from the church for safekeeping during renovations, and were all that was saved. The First Baptist Church (organized in 1812), and The Church of the Unity, offered space to the Second Parish until a new building was built. The design of a new church was copied from one in New Haven, which itself was in the Corinthian style of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London. It was dedicated in March of 1851. Edward Everett Hale gave the dedication, Edmund Hamilton Sears who wrote "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" wrote a special hymn, and Alonzo Hill gave the

sermon, which was beautifully written, sometimes distressingly sectarian, and full of cautions of future threats including corruption by materialism.

In 1861 the Civil War broke out in all its violence. Fifty two men from the First Unitarian Church served in that war and nine died. Alonzo Hill was sixty-one when the war began, and was comforter to his congregation during the siege of anxiety and loss. The Ladies Aid society at the church sponsored activities to provide supplies and help in regard to the war, and many members shared in various relief efforts. We know, for example, of the Soldiers' Relief near the Worcester railroad station, which gave comfort to traveling soldiers and returning wounded, and the Universalist, Clara Barton from Oxford, Massachusetts, pioneered nursing the wounded near battlefields.

Two years after the war, Hill celebrated his fortieth year in the First Unitarian pulpit. He was given a purse of \$3,394 by his fond congregation, and Edward Everett Hale wrote a warm letter in which he remembered that on the day of his ordination as pastor of The Church of the Unity, Hill had confirmed their friendship by reminding him that "Our savior sent us out two by two."

Alonzo Hill died in 1871. His funeral was performed by Edward Everett Hale and Edward Henry Hall, Hill's successor. "The decorations of the church for the occasion... were plain and simple in accordance with the expressed wish of the deceased. A star of laurel, enclosing a wreath of roses, ornamented the recess in the rear of the pulpit, and the four columns supporting the recess were twined with laurel. The pulpit was beautifully festooned with evergreens, interspersed with callas and wreaths, stars and crosses of rare exotics, the central ornament being a floral crown resting on a cross. The catafalque was entirely covered with laurel, and in front was suspended a rich floral wreath, surrounding a cross. At either end were stands of bouquets. On top of the coffin rested a rich and elegant collection of fragrant flowers, comprising a crown, an anchor and wreaths."



#### EDWARD HENRY HALL

Edward Hall came to Worcester in 1867 to help Alonzo Hill, and stayed for eleven years after Alonzo's death. He came to The First Unitarian pulpit at a time of great dislocation, when the country was barely beginning to heal from the civil war, the economy was woefully damaged, and liberal religion was in turmoil. Austin Garver, the fourth minister of the church spoke of this time in an address given many years later. He said "The earlier biblical and creedal liberalism still held sway in most of our churches as it did in our own. The harsher doctrines had been exchanged for milder, but the basis of belief remained much the same. Meanwhile floods of light were let in on these questions from scientific and historical studies which demanded new interpretations and especially fresh search for the foundations of reality. Men inquired if anything would be left. The answer was, 'All that is remains; nothing has been lost except what is illusory.'"

Hall was the son of a Unitarian minister, had a degree from Harvard Divinity School, had previous pastoral experience and had had the harrowing experience of being chaplain to Massachusetts' 44th Regiment in the war. He was a mature thirty eight years old when he was settled in Worcester. He was a gifted preacher and was able to manage the challenge of a congregation of many beliefs at the same time that he was active in the community. During his tenure in Worcester he belonged to the American Antiquarian Society, The Worcester Art Society, the Worcester Continentals, and the Worcester School Committee and many non-local groups such as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Unitarian Association. The world was changing indeed.

When Edward Hall's great gifts caused the First Parish in Cambridge to lure him away from Worcester, he left to replace his uncle in that church. His final sermon to the Second Parish was

an apology to the stricken members of his church who grieved over his leaving. Austin Garver, in the address quoted before, said "If we as a church, have come out into a liberty beyond doctrinal controversy, if we have in a measure attained to a faith above the assaults of doubt, if we are enabled to distinguish between the opinions of good men and the foundations of reality, if we have learned to discern some of the sacred meanings of a world in which God resides, and to feel that the place whereon we stand is holy ground, for that boon we are indebted in generous measure to the third minister of the Parish and to those who by their faith and confidence encouraged and sustained him."



## AUSTIN GARVER

Austin Garver went to a Lutheran College and Andover Theological School. He served first at a Calvinist Congregational Church, but a concern that had been developing in his mind finally brought him to understand that he could not continue to preach salvation by Christ, and Trinitarianism. He resigned from that church and became pastor of the Hopedale (Massachusetts) Unitarian church.

In Worcester's Second Parish the congregation was having difficulty finding a minister who would continue the tradition that began with Aaron Bancroft and continued through Edward Hall. Finally, in 1885, three years after the resignation of Hall, Austin Garver accepted a call to that pulpit, apparently encouraged by Edward Everett Hale. It was the centennial of the church, but little celebration had been planned while the search for a minister had stretched on. Austin Garver must have studied urgently for his second sermon, because he preached on the history of the First Unitarian Church.

In the summer of 1887, Reverend and Mrs. Garver went on a trip to Europe. Garver returned with an awakened interest in fine art, which lasted throughout his life. He made several more lengthy trips abroad during his time as minister, gave lectures and stereopticon shows of masterpieces, and was influential in the founding of the Worcester Art Museum. Children in the Second Parish Sunday School kept notebooks of copies of great paintings. He preached on the relationship of the arts and spiritual life. He used his pulpit to clarify the results of spiritual and ethical "laws", rather than to incite or rebuke his congregation. He gave a series of lectures on the books of the Old Testament as literature.

At about the time of Austin Garver's installation, The South Unitarian Memorial Church was established. Garver and Calvin Stebbins, then minister of the Church of the Unity, alternated in the pulpit. In 1895 the new congregation built a church on the corner of South Main Street and Claremont Street. By then the Garvers had moved into a parish house built by The First Unitarian Church on the corner of Highland Street and Lancaster Street.

The South Memorial Church lasted fewer than thirty years, and the Second Parish no longer owns a parish house. But an accomplishment of Garver's congregation that is very much still with us is our covenant, which is nearly unchanged since it was agreed upon in 1898. The three paragraphs of the 1785 covenant dedicated participants "and their offspring" to statements which Unitarians were unlikely to believe a hundred years later. The newspaper, "*The Spy*", wrote a feature story describing the change as due "to the immense broadening of religious values and ideas, that has been slowly going on ever since the Reformation, and has taken such tremendously rapid strides within the last century".

Reverend Garver retired in 1910, on the 25th anniversary of his installation. He died in 1918.



## EDWIN MITCHELL SLOCOMBE

In 1912, Edwin Mitchell Slocombe began what must have been a trying seven years in the pulpit of First Unitarian. The congregation had, again, taken several years to call their new pastor from a church in Maine this time. They had hoped that he would appeal to young people, but apparently some of the older members were not ready for his ideas.

The church was not thriving in popularity or finances. Neither was South Memorial Church, and the pastor of The Church of the Unity was soon to be replaced with the very controversial Charles E. Beals. The closeness of the three churches had faded.

Slocombe's first goal was to organize the congregational affairs. There were no by-laws, written reports, or annual meetings, but simply a small group of men who made decisions among themselves. There was no list of members. Slocombe suggested an annual meeting, open to all who had signed the covenant, an end to pew rentals, and a campaign to raise voluntary contributions. He had a concern that the symbols of religion might come to be, themselves, worshipped. His preaching was based on scanty notes and often wandered.

Austin Garver was often a guest preacher, making the contrast between them clear. The first annual meeting, insisted upon by Slocombe, comprised 56 out of the probably 300 members of the church. Nevertheless, Slocombe persevered.

In 1915, 108 members came to the annual meeting, and approved newly written Articles of Government. These rules provided for elected officers, committees for various functions, and a Prudential Committee. Reports including membership and financial status were to be published annually. Pew income still represented the great majority of church income however. The practice ended soon after Slocombe's resignation.

Meanwhile, the Church of the Unity was in desperate straights. Slocombe suggested that its members be offered the use of space in the First Church, but the Church of the Unity struggled on, becoming further weakened over issues of war.

As war in Europe became increasingly likely, ministers varied in their response. Slocombe remained anti-war for a long time, but finally, after the German sinking of the Lusitanian, he changed his views. Beals however, was so uncompromising in his pacifism, that he alienated his congregation, and when they mounted an American flag in the sanctuary Beals resigned. The Worcester Telegram described him as a "socialist" and compared him unfavorably to Slocombe. The congregation tied in a vote to dissolve, the American Unitarian Association stepped in to provide visiting ministers to the pulpit.

Fifty eight members of the First Unitarian Church went to war. A coal shortage was so severe in the winter of 1918 that volunteers cut wood for needy families. The influenza epidemic stuck, eventually killing almost as many as the war. By fall of that year, most public gatherings had been cancelled because of the epidemic. And then, miraculously, Armistice was signed, and the flu faded away. Edwin Slocombe was worn out. He resigned in January of 1919, in a state of nervous collapse. He wrote, "Considering that I have no talent whatsoever for organization work and dislike everything to do with it, I think I have done my share." He did, indeed! He recovered after months in a sanitarium, and eventually returned to successful ministry in Ware, and Lexington Ma. .





## MAXWELL SAVAGE

Many years after Slocombe left Worcester, Marguerite Downing Savage, Maxwell's wife, painted his portrait so that there wouldn't be an interruption in the sequence of portraits of ministers in the parlor of the First Unitarian Church. She had already painted her husband's portrait in 1941. She was a gifted professional artist.

Maxwell Savage, the son of a well known Unitarian minister, came to Worcester after serving several other parishes. He was 43 in 1919 when he began his ministry at the Second Parish, and had just shepherded his previous parish through the final years of World War I. There would be about a decade of calm before the next national crisis, but the Second Parish was busy.

Fortunately, Savage had help almost from the beginning of his Worcester ministry. Anna Brooks Carter was hired in 1920, the year of the passage of the women's suffrage 19th Amendment, as parish assistant. She had graduated from the Tuckerman School, which trained students for Unitarian church work. Her assigned duties were to be Sunday School superintendent, to help with young people's programs, and to cooperate with committees and Rev. Savage. She performed these duties until Savage's retirement when she retired too.

The choice of Maxwell Savage to fill the Second Parish pulpit was made with the approval of the failing South Memorial Church and the Church of the Unity. The parishioners of those churches liked his sermons and ministry so well, that they attended his services in increasing numbers. Soon a union was being planned. The first act toward that goal, was the January 1920 transfer of a bequest made by Alice Rice to the Church of the Unity in 1900, to the Second Parish. By April of that year, the Massachusetts legislature had approved the legal union of the three churches.

Profits from the sale of the two other churches had benefited the Second Parish so that it was possible to install a new organ and to plan a new, much needed, parish house. "Unity House" was completed in 1922, and included an auditorium with a well equipped stage to be called "Unity Hall", a kitchen and dining room, and Sunday School space. By 1924, the membership of the church numbered 800, a 300% increase! During these years, a men's Layman's League and a Women's Evening Alliance were established, and continued until the 1980's.

The years of quiet growth and prosperity ended abruptly in 1929, when the booming stock market collapsed and world wide depression followed. By 1930 the effects were evident in Worcester despite Worcester's broad industrial base. By 1932, Worcester's unemployment rate was 25%. Apples were distributed by the County Extension Service for the unemployed to sell on the street. Some men gratefully found work constructing the Memorial Auditorium. The church ran soup kitchens. Roosevelt's programs to relieve the depression began in 1933, but it took years to return to normalcy. Somehow, in 1935, the church was able to celebrate its 150th anniversary with more elaborate festivities than the 100th had seen! The following year, funds were found to reinforce the church steeple. And then---

In September of 1938, a fierce hurricane howled through Worcester with winds up to 100 miles per hour. Among its victims was the First Unitarian Church. The sanctuary was destroyed, leaving the Corinthian facade standing free like a stage set. The new organ console crashed down through the balcony, and met the Paul Revere bell in the rubble of the basement. Unity House was not damaged. Contributions poured in, and the church was swiftly rebuilt. New building codes required structural and safety changes, such as adding the curved stairs from the balconies to the front of the church, but the design of the sanctuary was basically unchanged. The restored building was rededicated in September 1939, just as World War II began in Europe.

The United States joined the war in 1941. Relief efforts for the war in Europe had already begun and continued. Nearly 200 members of the congregation joined the military, and eight members died in that service. Some present members can remember the somber tone of church services

during those years. The American flag was hung in the church and an expanded version of "Eternal Father Strong to Save", including mention of each branch of the service, was sung every Sunday.

At the end of the war, Maxwell Savage, gave notice of his intention to retire, and he did so in the summer of 1946, after 26 years of service.



### WALTER DONALD KRING

When Maxwell Savage retired, the Second Parish was at the peak of its popularity, with almost 1,500 members. In the 1930s, First Unitarian had been the largest Unitarian Church in the country. It was urgent to find a new minister who could carry on the work.

Walter Donald Kring was a Navy Chaplain who had been ordained in a Presbyterian church. As WWII came to an end, he was accepted at Yale in a doctorate program to complete his doctorate in philosophy. He had many interests, including Quakerism and Eastern religions, and was dissatisfied with the Orthodoxy of his early training. Dr. Charles Park of the First Church in Boston, recommended him to the Second Parish search committee and after hearing him preach the church unanimously decided to call him to its pulpit. He was installed in 1946.

Kring was an artistic and creative man, who during his stay at First Unitarian directed the creation of a marionette theater that met wide acclaim, and oversaw the production of the Court Hill Players' first play, "Tom Sawyer", on Unity Hall's stage. He made prize winning pottery and did worthwhile research on glazes, made stained glass, and made a mosaic altarpiece celebrating ten religions. He was one of the founders of the Worcester Craft Center.

In 1953, a violent tornado crashed through Worcester killing 93 people and devastating residential neighborhoods. One member of the church and another's family member were among the dead, and most members either had suffered damage or knew those who did.

In 1955, an expenditure of \$125,000 was made to arrange a chapel above the Bancroft Room parlor, and to construct Sunday School rooms under the sanctuary, replacing the partitioned spaces in Unity Hall. The Sunday School curriculum had been changed early in Kring's tenure, to comprise a "revolving" four year course of Old Testament, New Testament, comparative religion, and Unitarianism courses. He held various evening courses, and arranged for a young people's group of Unitarian and Temple Emmanuel youth.

At the end of that productive year, 1955, Mr. Kring announced his resignation and his acceptance of a call to All Souls' Church in New York City.

Walter Kring wrote several books, including "The Fruits of Our Labors, The Bicentennial History of the First Unitarian Church of Worcester, 1785-1985".



## WALLACE ROBBINS

Frank Schulman had been assistant minister under Walter Kring, and stayed on during the search for his replacement. During that time, he ran the church school, preached on Sundays when a guest was not in the pulpit, and generally held the church together.

The search committee and congregation chose Wallace Robbins, a native of Massachusetts who was then the president of Meadville Theological School. He was installed at the Second Parish in 1956.

Four years later, the 175th anniversary of the church was celebrated with a typical Federal era service. Participants were clothed in period costume, the scripture was read from the Isaiah Thomas bible, and Rev. Robbins read an Aaron Bancroft sermon from a pulpit bearing an hourglass and several early hymns were sung.

Meanwhile, the Universalist and Unitarian churches merged in 1961 to form the Unitarian Universalist Association. Universalists were the Protestants with the most in common with Unitarians. Both rejected the tenets of Calvinism. Originally the two denominations differed in emphasis, with the Unitarians more concerned with the unity of God and the search for truth, and the Universalists more concerned with biblical guidance and the universality of salvation.

Worcester had one Universalist church at this time, founded in 1841. In 1955 they had moved from Pleasant Street to a new building on Holden Street. In 1969, after the merger, they changed their name to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester. The merger of the two faiths for administrative purposes suited many members of both denominations. It did not suit Wallace Robbins, or Walter Kring. Robbins wrote of the new organization's "rigidity of control and distrust of difference", of the "tyranny of a church (sic) which ignores the rights of its own minority". He felt that the humanists, in both denominations, had prevailed, and broken with the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In 1962 the First Unitarian and Central Congregational churches joined for a study program on Communism, based on the "assumption that communism makes no sense... as an economy or political system...is in fact a theological system". Also that year the Second Parish joined with many other Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish congregations for a Union Thanksgiving Service. In 1965 it joined the "Open Door", an ecumenical settlement house in "blighted" areas of Worcester, popular with neighborhood children for games, classes and story telling.

The 1960s were a time of revolt, pain, and guilt in the entire population, as issues of the war in Vietnam, and black empowerment were being debated. In 1968, the UUA gave \$1 million to a black power group, causing deep divisions among the proponents of social justice in the Unitarian Universalist Association. Both Rev. Robbins and Rev. Kring were leaders of the more moderate position, called "BAWA"; Blacks and Whites Together.

During Wallace Robbins tenure there had been a number of short term assistant ministers. Edwin Randle became associate minister during these conflicts over the UUA, and was asked to supervise a parish study. The study brought out an apparent gulf between the "Christian" character of First Unitarian, and the increasingly "humanistic" UUA.

In 1970, after divorcing his wife Eleanor, Wallace Robbins married Malama Providakes. Malama was a frequent soloist in the church choir, director of the children's choir, taught music at Anna Maria College, and was the founder of the Salisbury Singers. Only three years later, Wallace had his first surgery for cancer

In 1974 the congregation sent delegates to the General Assembly of the UUA. Robbins disapproval was extreme. He wrote: "The mob excitements we have experienced in the past have

wasted endowments, and enraged the constituents at home. We have neglected our own business while telling others how to run theirs. More delegates of serious interest and dedication would be attracted to church business than monkey business; and it would produce a parliament where there is now a physical occupancy of microphones, and time is devoted to personal causes rather than to the general good."

Robbins had further surgery in 1975, and soon a search committee was formed to find a minister to serve after Robbins retirement.



### CHRISTOPHER RAIBLE

Christopher Raible began his ministry at the Second Parish in 1976. He was, from the beginning, loyal to the UUA whose staff he had belonged to for the preceding six years. By 1980, a petition was brought by members of the congregation, questioning his position on parish matters, and complaining of the "radical, social ideology" of the UUA. The petition suggested that First Unitarian should withdraw from the UUA, questioned the right of the minister to speak on behalf of the church in support of homosexuality and women's liberation. The petition objected to the degenderization of hymns and the use of the church building by outsiders. A parish vote was taken, but only on the question of UUA membership which the result favored continuing the association, 83 to 23.

In February of 1982, Christopher Raible submitted his resignation.



### 1983 and Afterward

A description of the Reverend Barbara Merritt's ministry (1983-2010) and The Rev. Thomas Schade (1999- present) will be told by those who come after us. The current congregation will write their own stories, and the voices of all who worship at 90 Main Street will join with the choruses of those who have gone before. There will yet be new music chiming out from our ancient and always changing bell in the steeple.



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