

**UNITARIAN AND UNIVERSALIST MINISTERS  
CANTON, MASSACHUSETTS**

FROM THE CANTON BICENTENNIAL HISTORY BOOK

(with edits and additional information about recent ministers)

Last Revised 6/16/2017

### MINISTERS FROM THE UNITARIAN CHURCH

The fortunes of Canton's first church were inextricably linked with the history of the town itself. Until 1820 Church and State were one in what was indeed a theocracy. The church building was the place where annual and special town meetings were held. The church was supported by public money, and there was a ministerial tax rate similar to the levies for schools and highways. Such a form of government may seem surprising or even repugnant today, but it is more understandable when one realizes that all townspeople were parish members and citizens of both town and church.

The Church was founded by the Pilgrim fathers whose religion was Congregational and Calvinist in its origin and doctrine. The first church building was at the crest of what later was known as the Old English Cemetery, and it was probably gathered and built by the Apostle John Eliot. The location can lead to confusion because the English Cemetery only contains the remains of Anglican Episcopal adherents who were later arrivals in the town.

The first minister of what is now the First Parish was **Joseph Morse** who graduated Harvard in 1695, and came here in 1707 to preach to a congregation seeking a local church and a resident minister. The church building itself was erected in the same year and was located at the south west corner of the present Canton Corner Cemetery. The church and the minister were closely connected, since it is believed that the land on which the church stood had been previously owned by Reverend Morse. Morse had purchased 134 acres of land from the Ponkapoag Indians on both sides of present-day Washington Street where the Canton and St. Mary's cemeteries are now situated.

Morse spent his first ten years here as an unordained preacher, for it was not until 1717 that he was officially given his holy orders as a full-fledged minister. Thus the First Parish bases its foundation as 1717 not 1707. Morse was a kind and virtuous man who among other works educated Indian children in his own home. Yet his pastorate lasted only ten years, due to a contentious congregation who in time hounded him out of the parish. He was accused of being too liberal in doctrine, of flat-out lying about parish matters, and of having a drinking problem. There is not a whit of evidence for these charges, and he was welcomed to a parish in Randolph where he remained until he retired and moved back to Canton where he died in 1732. By then he was judged to be somewhat of an eccentric. His house with its magnificent apple orchard was at the south end of the present St. Mary's Cemetery near the main street. From there he could view his disaffected former parishioners, and he would sit in the orchard all Sunday "to keep the Christians from stealing my apples."

The Second Minister was Parson **Samuel Dunbar** who was probably the most remarkable and powerful clergyman of any faith who ever toiled in Canton. No one could accuse Dunbar of being too liberal in his religion, for he was an eighteenth century re-incarnation of Jeremiah the Prophet. He was a Calvinist divine for whom hell and damnation were not only real concepts but

## Unitarian and Universalist Ministers in Canton, Massachusetts

---

the likely destination for most of his flock unless they rapidly mended their ways. Dunbar born in 1704 was a graduate of Harvard in 1723, and a fine scholar proficient in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and a protégé of Cotton Mather.

He came here as a young man of twenty three in 1727 and was to be an active pastor for over 55 years. He would not tolerate dissent or lax moral practices in his parish and would frequently have the congregation excommunicate for a time those he felt had erred. He had a running dispute for years with an Irishman named Lyon. When his foe passed away, Dunbar reluctantly conducted a burial service in which he bluntly stated that “the body lies buried here, but the soul is in hell.”

The Parson was a disputatious sort with no tolerance for other faiths. He challenged the veracity of the local Anglican pastor and claimed that the Episcopal membership numbers were inflated lies. Apart from that he was a stirring sermonizer who preached and gave instructions at least three times a week. A number of his manuscripts have survived and his sermons were powerful and persuasive. He numbered all his homilies, and as evidence of his prolific work, number 8059 was written seven years before he died. By 1783 he had written and delivered over 9000 such exhortations.

He had marvelous health and never missed a Sunday service in his fifty-five year pastorate except for the last week of his life. In 1755 at the age of 51 he went as a chaplain with one of His Majesty’s Regiments to Crown Point in the French and Indian War. During the American Revolution, he was an ardent patriot and prayed publicly that the English fleet would be dashed to pieces on the Cohasset rocks.

He and his wife had a large family and many of his descendants were distinguished citizens of this town. He built a home on what is now Chapman Street, and it was described as one of the handsomest houses between Boston and Providence. At the time ministers were not provided parsonages but were given fairly generous salaries through town meeting appropriations that allowed them to live in comfortable surroundings. The Dunbar home known as the “Old Manse” burned down in 1884, but the property remained in the hands of Dunbar descendants until recent times.

One of Dunbar’s successors in 1892 described him as a minister, teacher, mayor, judge and adviser to all his people. During his pastorate, the church building was literally pulled down and replaced between 1745 and 1747. The new building was still within today’s cemetery and was only forty feet from the street, ten feet closer than its predecessor. Dunbar’s last public service was on July 4, 1783 at a ceremony celebrating the victorious end of the Revolutionary War. Within ten days he was dead and had left an immense vacuum in a stunned parish.

It was not easy to replace one who had been so dominating in so many ways. The parishioners, however, were charmed by the preaching of young Aaron Bancroft who spent eight Sabbaths here in the fall of 1784. Bancroft was of a new theological school which was the forerunner of

## Unitarian and Universalist Ministers in Canton, Massachusetts

---

Unitarianism. He believed in a kinder, gentler and more forgiving God than had Dunbar and shuddered at rigid Calvinism. Moreover, he like a growing number of other clergy at the time, did not believe in the Trinity while still upholding the divinity of Christ. Such persons were known as Armenians or Arians but were soon to be called Unitarians. Aaron Bancroft would in time be the first President of the American Unitarian Association.

The people of First Parish liked his message of love and forgiveness and offered him the pastorate, only to be shocked by his refusal of it. Many years later he revealed that he felt that the Calvinistic impact Dunbar had left on the parish could not be overcome by the newer doctrine. Bancroft went on to found a parish in Worcester where his son, George, a great American historian, was born.

**Zechariah Howard**, a young Revolutionary War veteran who had attended Harvard after the conflict was chosen as pastor at a town meeting in 1786. Howard was more a Congregational minister than a Unitarian one, so much so that he was known as “Priest Howard.” He purchased the even then ancient Tilden home on Pleasant Street which is still in use as part of Pequitside, and is referred to as the “Red House.” Howard accumulated sixty four acres adjoining the home and proved to be an able farmer as well as a minister. He was a respected pastor for twenty years resigning shortly before his death in 1806. His widow, Patty, who survived him for many years, was a lover of animals especially cats. She had constructed in her home a special stair case for her feline friends, and this may still be seen connecting the second floor to the attic in the Red House.

Significant events occurred during the time of the Fourth Minister, **William Richey**, who labored in this corner of the Lord’s Vineyard from 1807 to 1820. Ritchie, a Dartmouth graduate, was, like his predecessors, a man of letters. It was during his tenure that disestablishment of the Church began, and by 1820 the Parish had to rely on support from the congregation and not from town taxes. In his early ministry in New Hampshire he had been a believer in the Trinity, but by the time town meeting invited him to Canton he had abandoned those tenets and was the first essentially Unitarian minister of First Parish. Even within the Church there was some dissent from Ritchie’s preaching by those holding to traditional Congregationalist theology. Enough members ceased to attend services or to support the Church that Ritchie offered to cut his compensation in half to offset the lower revenues. The traditionalists were in the minority but were joined by enough other unhappy members that Ritchie and the parish amicably severed their ties.

Ritchie’s income had been generous for the time and had enabled him in 1809 to build the house at 79 Pleasant Street which was later to be occupied by the Draper family and is today’s Pequitside Farm.

In 1822 Reverend Ritchie, who had left Canton, sold the property to his successor, **Benjamin Huntoon**. Like Dunbar, Huntoon was to be a lasting influence on the Parish and the town. His

## Unitarian and Universalist Ministers in Canton, Massachusetts

---

brilliance in writing and in speech was awesome to those who encountered him. Another Dartmouth alumnus, he possessed a degree in divinity from Andover Theological School. When he came here at the age of thirty the split between the Congregationalists and the Unitarians was coming to a climax. Huntoon in 1828 was to see the departure of the traditionalists who then formed the Orthodox Congregational Church which over time evolved into today's United Church of Christ.

Huntoon had two separate periods of service in Canton, one from 1822 to 1829 and the other from 1841 to 1849. It was during his first pastorate that it became clear that the house of worship erected eighty years before had capacity and structural defects. The present church was built in 1824 and dedicated in January 1825, and its Gothic design is the result of Huntoon's preferences. His son, Daniel, was Canton's first historian and the source of almost all published research on the period before the Civil War. Benjamin had a great interest in the early public schools and visited them in a semi-official capacity as a pupil examiner. Invited to give a sermon dedicating a church in Bangor, Maine, he decided to take an offer to be its pastor. Why he departed from Canton is not clear, but after ten years in Maine he and his old Canton congregation were reunited. The Unitarian faith was still evolving, and even though Huntoon was considered a liberal theologian, he still preached that the New Testament was divinely inspired and authored. He spoke out boldly not only on dogmatic questions but also on the political issues of the time, such as the morality of the Mexican War and abolition. His political views led to some disenchantment with him from former supporters, so much so that he again left Canton in 1849 to accept a post in Marblehead. He returned here in 1860 to retire at Pequitside where he died in 1864.

Between Huntoon's two pastorates there had been two other ministers at First Parish. One was **Henry F. Edes** who was pastor from 1831 to 1833. We do not know why his time was so brief, but we do know that in 1832 he built the fine home at 54 Pleasant Street now occupied by the Crane family. This house was also to be the home of Edes's successor, **Orestes Augustus Brownson** who stayed for only one year from May 1834 to May 1835.

Daniel Huntoon describes Dr. Brownson "as a preacher he was impressive in manner and appearance; his voice, though husky, was well-managed; his utterance forcible; the muscles of his large face worked convulsively as he spoke." In 1836 Brownson established a society for Christian Union and Progress; in 1838 he founded the Boston Quarterly Review which was nationally esteemed. He was a friend of the Alcotts, Hawthorne, Thoreau and Longfellow. The historian, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., did his doctoral thesis on Brownson, which was published in 1939 and became a best seller. In it he shows that after 1844 there was a "conspiracy of silence" by the literary establishment toward Brownson because in that year he embraced Catholicism.

The story of the First Parish in its first 150 years is really the saga of its pastors. It is remarkable that one small church could have had so many distinguished, learned, powerful and even controversial spiritual directors. They made an impact on the lives of their parishioners, whether

## Unitarian and Universalist Ministers in Canton, Massachusetts

---

it was Dunbar's gloomy acceptance of Predestination, or the more cheerful philosophy of Ritchie and Huntoon. Some of them put down family roots in Canton, and for decades after there were Dunbars and Huntoons active in the church and the town. These ministers were also politically involved and left a legacy stressing the moral obligation to speak out for justice. Some were loved; some not, but they all made a difference in the Parish and in the town.

When Reverend Benjamin Huntoon in 1849 ended his second pastorate of the First Congregational Church, it was a thriving powerful force in the Canton community. Huntoon was a scholar and a worthy successor to the founding ministers. The membership of the congregation encompassed persons of various economic strata but in general were more educated and more affluent than the parishioners of the other churches in town. All of the other Protestant churches were in sound shape, and St. John's had yet to be established.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century the First Church continued to fare well, and it commanded the loyalty of the best people in Canton. There were some changes; among which were frequent pastoral change-overs between 1850 and 1873 when five different ministers occupied the pulpit. Membership, however, was constant and theologically the movement to a more defined Unitarianism continued. Benjamin Huntoon had been instrumental in making it clear that the Church was indeed Unitarian and not simply another aspect of a Christian-centered one.

Each minister of the First Church lived comfortably with his family in the large parsonage at 61 Chapman Street. These men were well-schooled, wrote with feeling as well as with analytical power, and for the time traveled widely. Often in the 1880's and 1890's visiting ministers conducted Sunday services fifteen to eighteen times a year.

One of the pastors who made an impact on the parish and on the town was **Henry Fitch Jenks** who was minister from 1885 to 1905 and continued as an active Pastor Emeritus until his death in 1920. In years of service to the local Church, he was exceeded only by the legendary Samuel Dunbar who was here from 1727 until 1783. Jenks was forty-three years old when he came and, like his predecessors, had a solid educational background, having graduated from Harvard in 1863 and from the Cambridge Divinity School in 1866. Before arriving in Canton he had been pastor of the Unitarian Church in Lawrence.

In his time he participated in the funeral services of a number of notables such as that in 1885 of Helen Revere of Morristown, New Jersey, great-granddaughter of Paul Revere. The next year he conducted the burial services for the Canton historian, Daniel Thomas Vose Huntoon, the forty-year old son of Benjamin.

In October 1885 Jenks gently nudged the Church back into one Christian custom by persuading the congregation to vote to celebrate the Lord's Supper on the first Sunday of each alternate month.

## Unitarian and Universalist Ministers in Canton, Massachusetts

---

Parish members were active participants in the life of the Church, and the records show the contributions of families such as Downes, Otis, Draper, Chapman, Williams, Bright, Noyes, Endicott, Reed, Tucker, Fisher, McKendry, Billings, Hewitt, Sumner, Wattles, French, Horton, Capen, Shaw and Dunbar. These were all prominent names in town, yet the minister often presided at funeral services of parishioners who died at the town's Poor Farm, too.

Jenks married Lavina Angier and had the pleasure of christening his own son, Frederick Angier Jenks, in 1887. That same year a Union Thanksgiving service was held at the Church in which all the Protestant denominations in town took part. In that era there was little contact between the Protestant churches and St. John's. And sad to say all concerned preferred to keep it that way for decades to come.

In October 1887 Jenks and the parish commemorated the 170th anniversary of its founding in 1717 by Reverend Joseph Morse. The next year from May to November 1888 the church was closed for major renovation and restoration including new stained glass windows. One was a memorial to the fabled minister, Samuel Dunbar and was presented by Charles F. Dunbar, Esq., of Buffalo, New York. A second was dedicated to Benjamin Huntoon, as he was then considered to be the first completely Unitarian minister of the Church.

Another noteworthy event was a pulpit exchange on December 16, 1888 when Henry Jenks preached at the Evangelical Congregational Church, while Reverend Mark Taylor of that church gave the sermon at the First Parish Church. Jenks noted that this was the first instance of this since the Evangelical Church was founded seventy years before. At that time some members of the First Church who did not agree on the doctrinal movement toward Unitarianism departed to form the Evangelical Congregational Church.. While the pulpit exchange with the Congregationalists remembered the past, another one the same year was a harbinger of the future, as Jenks and Reverend John Vannear of the Universalist Church also traded pulpits one Sunday. The wheel of religion continued to turn in 1889, when one of the visiting preachers was Reverend Nathan Chamberlain, pastor of St. John's Episcopal Church in East Boston, who had been minister of the First Church in Canton from 1857 to 1860.

The Unitarian Church here as elsewhere has had a tradition of liberalism not only in theology but on social issues. An early example of this is seen in the minister's notes for Sunday April 7, 1889 when he notes that "a young colored man, a teacher at Tuskegee, Alabama, gave an account of the School at the regular morning services directly after the sermon, which greatly interested the congregation." As a result of a committee formed to see what action to take on his appeal, it was voted the next Sunday to send clothing, books and a monetary contribution to Tuskegee. Again on July 16, 1893 Booker T. Washington himself came to the Church and in lieu of the Sermon gave an address on his work. Other social action occurred in 1889 when the parish sent a check to the victims of the Johnstown flood, and in 1908 when a check for \$100 and twenty large bundles of clothing were sent to refugees of the Chelsea fire.

## Unitarian and Universalist Ministers in Canton, Massachusetts

---

One hundred years ago geographical proximity to a church influenced where one worshipped. From Ponkapoag to the First Church was a substantial journey for some folks. So for many years the Unitarian pastor conducted monthly services at the Ponkapoag Fire Station and later at the Ponkapoag Chapel with an attendance of thirty to fifty persons.

In 1898 Jenks participated at the funeral services at the Evangelical Congregational Church for Congressman Elijah Morse, and he was also a speaker at the 50th Anniversary celebration of the founding in Canton of the Universalist Church in 1849. Henry Jenks' full-time ministry ended in 1905 when he reached sixty-five. His replacement was the popular forty-year old **Bradley Gilman**, who was to serve till November, 1917. By the time of Gilman's arrival the celebration of the Lord's Supper had been abandoned, but Gilman brought it back in a limited way for the Christmas service of 1905 and the Easter one of 1906. He noted that most, though not all, congregants participated and that there was "no theological test, no fermented wine" and that matters were "less dogmatic" and more sympathetic.

Gilman in 1915 began his third five-year contract which was dissolved by mutual agreement in 1917. On April 6 of 1917 Congress declared war on Germany, and on Sunday evening May 20th a joint patriotic service was held at the Church to which all the ministers and congregations in Canton were invited. Reverend Gilman wryly pointed out that the Roman Catholics were the only ones not to accept. In any event there was a large and enthusiastic group of citizens present. In October 1917, Gilman, then aged sixty, relocated to Palo Alto, California for what he called "a new field of work." Before he left one hundred and seventy-five persons attended a banquet to celebrate the Bicentennial of the Church.

Bradley Gilman retired to California after leading the parish in the celebration of the Church's Bicentennial. Gilman's successor a year later was twenty-four year old **Cloyd Hampton Valentine** from Vineland, New Jersey who arrived here right in the middle of the deadly flu epidemic. He was in his second ministerial assignment, and within a week presided at the funeral of Army soldier George Howard Horton, a victim of the flu who died while in service. His family had the first Gold Star in the parish from which twenty-three young men had gone to war.

Valentine was to be minister for over a decade. It was the "Roaring Twenties," America was at peace and the economy was booming. Valentine's time here was a tranquil one, but he noted some concern for the future. On the positive side, he married in August 1919 Miss Minnie Packard of Quincy, and in 1920 the local church became the first one in the United States and Canada to achieve its quota for the United Unitarian Campaign. Canton's goal was \$2000 which was a substantial sum for the time, equivalent to about \$40000 today.

On January 31, 1920 Pastor-Emeritus Jenks died and Valentine participated in the burial services at Mount Auburn Cemetery. After his first three years here, Valentine observed in the Minister's Notes that in that period he had taken part in fifty-three parish funerals of folks he considered pillars of the church. His hopes for the future lay in the young, yet christenings were not keeping

## Unitarian and Universalist Ministers in Canton, Massachusetts

---

pace with funerals, obviously a disturbing trend. He did, however, have the pleasure of baptizing his own son, Richard in June, 1928.

Valentine left the Parish in September 1928 and was replaced in January 1929 by **Charles W. Casson**, who was here until May, 1933. His term encompassed the most devastating years of the Great Depression, and the hard times were reflected in the pinched operating budgets of those years. The Church was financially secure, but it, too, was not exempt from the cutbacks in programs necessitated by a collapsed economy.

Things were not that much better for the next minister, **Elbridge Fernald Stoneham**, who was called here in August 1934 from the First Unitarian Church of Winchester to be the joint minister of the First Congregational (Unitarian) Church and the First Universalist Church. This milestone was a precursor of the union of the two churches forty years later and was based on the economic rationale of sharing a minister in those trying days.

At first the two churches tried the experiment of holding joint services every other Sunday in each church, but the matter was eventually put to a vote, and by a margin of only a few votes in each parish, it was decided to have separate services but with one minister.

Stoneham wrote, "I managed to straddle the two horses for a few years until resigning from the Universalist pastorate on August 31, 1938 when it became evident that no progress could be made in uniting the two churches, largely because of geographical reasons, and differences in religious temperament. The Unitarian Church generously made it possible for me to continue serving the one parish."

A few weeks later the September hurricane of 1938 weakened the church steeple so much that it had to be rebuilt the following year. Stoneham's term as pastor ended in October 1941 and some months were spent in securing his replacement.

The new clergyman, **Thomas A. Sinclair** turned out to be a fine selection who was to be the minister from April 1942 to June 30, 1953. He came with his wife and their three small children from Billerica where he had been pastor of the First Church Unitarian since 1936. The local church led by President Eliot French welcomed the Sinclairs by completely re-decorating the parsonage and installing new plumbing. Reverend Sinclair was awarded a five-year contract at a salary of \$2500 per annum plus a one month's paid vacation. With the parsonage it was a comfortable financial arrangement fifty-five years ago.

Minister Sinclair led his congregation during World War Two and into the growth years after the war as suburban towns like Canton burgeoned in population. In April 1943 he started the John Eliot Union, a young people's group for youngsters twelve to fourteen which met monthly and had socials in the Parish Hall which attracted forty to sixty persons. In 1951 the renowned and successful Unitarian Auction began under the auspices of the Fellowship Group, and over \$1200 was raised in the first one.

## Unitarian and Universalist Ministers in Canton, Massachusetts

---

Capital improvements were evident. First in 1948 a new hot-air circulating heating system was acquired for the Parish Hall at a cost of \$2500. Most notable, however, was the installation in 1951 of a new electric pipe organ in memory of John H. Draper by his wife and three brothers. The magnificent new organ cost over \$13000 and replaced one dated 1846.

The Sinclair years were happy ones for all concerned, but he resigned in May 1953 to accept a significant advancement as the first Director of the Northern New England Region of the Unitarian Church in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont.

**Charles O. Richardson, Jr.** became Pastor in October 1953 arriving here with his wife and two children from Stow where he had been Pastor of the first Parish Church. In his three and a half years here he accomplished much. An addition to the church was built which included seven school rooms, a new chapel, and offices. Forty-two new members were enrolled, and the P.M. club, an evening group for young adults, was founded which sponsored a May breakfast and a fashion show. The Auction continued to be successful and the Parish Hall was completely re-decorated.

Richardson resigned in 1958 and was succeeded by a young man, **Alfred H. Fowlie**, a liberal in both religious and social matters, and one not timid in expressing his opinions. Canton was not only his first pastorate, it was also the site of his ordination to the Unitarian ministry on October 19, 1958. Before his new congregation led by President C. Dana Draper, seven ministers officiated in his installation.

Fowlie interacted well with the youth of the parish. Within a month of his arrival he conducted a Thanksgiving family service and collected food for the Home for Little Wanderers. The P.M. club was again active with a Square Dance and a lively Christmas party. Reverend Fowlie founded and encouraged parish discussion groups and by doing so began a new and long-lasting institution. He felt that such groups particularly if held in parishioners' homes would permit greater latitude of radical opinions to be expressed than if confined to the Church or Parish Hall. Matters discussed need not be solely religious in theme, for example much time was spent on the Town's 1959 Master Plan.

In 1959 the Unitarian Church nationally began discussion of a merger with the Universalist. Such discussions took place here, and in April 1959 the Annual Meeting of the local church approved the merger concept. The consummation of the union locally would take another fifteen years but clearly the momentum had begun.

Minister Fowlie became a factor in an issue that had been smoldering in Canton for a few years. The public schools in the early 1950's in co-operation with some of the churches had instituted a Released Time Program through which students on a voluntary basis could be dismissed from class once a week to go to their church for religious education. After the program had been in effect for a few years, it had to be abandoned because the growing school population caused a

## Unitarian and Universalist Ministers in Canton, Massachusetts

---

severe classroom shortage and the establishment of a two-platoon system in certain schools. The numbers and the logistics did not allow a Released Time Program.

By the late 1950's the School Committee felt that the space pressure had abated enough to re-institute the plan. Fowlie was vigorously against the concept and wrote "I was opposed to this on several grounds, and I took my case to the newspaper and to my church. After many meetings of the school board and much discussion among the churches of Canton, it was decided by the majority of churches to continue released time. The Universalist Church and the Unitarian Church stood firm, but alas we did not prevail. I think we lost because we did not push hard enough at the real issue i.e. that released time is detrimental to our Democratic position of complete separation of Church and State. Instead we concentrated on the valuable school time lost by the students. The school board compromised, and we lost the real issue. It was amazing to me how reluctant our liberals are to take a stand that sets them apart from the orthodox churches. This is not so for most of the orthodox."

Alfred Fowlie left here in 1963 and was followed by a number of ministers who were not only fine pastors but were well-known and accorded respect in the whole community. **William Richard Jacobsen** was here from 1964 to 1968, and was succeeded by **John Hay Nichols** in the 1969 to 1972 period. Next was **Kenneth Phifer** who was minister from 1973 to 1980 and who was a key participant in the consolidation (merger) of the local Unitarian and Universalist Churches in 1974 and was the first minister of the united congregations. He loved history and spoke about history of Unitarian Universalists frequently, maybe every Sunday. His theological bent was humanism. He loved movies and would see several a week on his day off. He left to go to a larger church in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

The next minister, **Anita Farber-Robertson**, came in 1980 and served for a decade. She was the first female pastor for the combined congregation and had a very positive impact on her church and on Canton. She had a sincere and personal interest in her parishioners and was well-liked by all the members of the Canton Clergy Association. Anita helped establish the Canton Hot Line and later the Canton Food Pantry.

Anita was followed by **Brad Cullen** (1993-1996) who helped organize outing events and softball games for members of all ages. In the pulpit, Brad was thoughtful and thought-provoking, with a great fondness for the transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson. (After leaving First Parish and getting married, he changed his name to Alex Riegel.)

**Diane Teichert** served as minister from 1998-2008. She was involved with the Canton Clergy Association and helped organize "Promote Understanding: Stop the Hate" and the Clergy Association 9/11 service on our front lawn. Covenant groups were initiated under Diane's initiative and leadership, and continue today. She had great interest in social activism. She won an award for best sermon in 1977 when that the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly was held in Boston.

## **Unitarian and Universalist Ministers in Canton, Massachusetts**

---

**Beverly Morrison (Buffy) Boke** served from 2011 to 2017, after which she retired. Buffy and her husband Nick brought some international flavor and perspective to First Parish, as they had lived and worked in the Middle East for many years. Buffy helped people through transitions in their lives, including delivering personal and moving tributes for members and friends who passed away.

The beautiful old First Church remains in the true center of Canton. It is a colonial beacon and an historical landmark. Its true strength, however, is in the character, quality and integrity of its members. It continues to bear witness to the injustices and wrongs of our society, and three hundred years after its founding remains a force for good.

### MINISTERS FROM THE UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Universalism is a religion that in its roots holds to a belief that God will save all souls. This thesis has been found from time to time in the history of western Christianity. The doctrine spread in the United States primarily because of the preaching of John Murray (1741-1815) who came from England in 1770. Murray visited Canton on two occasions, once to officiate at the funeral of Mrs. Richard Gridley, and the second time to preside at the funeral of Canton's most renowned Universalist, General Richard Gridley. In 1776 while Gridley was supervising the fortifications surrounding British held Boston, he first met and heard Murray. He was attracted to Murray's religious views and became an early convert to Universalism. This was not a popular dogma in Canton and Gridley was ostracized by his fellow citizens here. In fact the Revolutionary War hero was so shunned that in 1783 when peace and American independence were achieved Gridley was not allowed to participate in the parades and celebrations marking the event.

Gridley was hurt and asked why he was not part of the festivities. He was told, "Because, General, you are not considered by those having that manner in charge a Christian." Gridley sadly answered, "I love my country, and my neighbor as myself. If they have any better religion, I should like to know what it is."

How many other adherents of the Universalist doctrine were in the town cannot now be determined. The first significant gathering occurred in January 1819 when the Norfolk Universalist Society was founded at the home of George Downes who lived at Canton Corner. There were 152 members at the beginning, of whom 88 were Canton residents. In the early years worship meetings were held in various locations in addition to the Downes' home. One site often used was Carroll's tavern which is now the site of St. Gerard Majella Church. The first minister was Reverend Richard Carrique who resigned in 1821, and it was not till 1849 that there are any official records indicating weekly services. Yet it is certain that there was some form of continuing Universalist worship. By 1840 meetings were held in the South Canton school house, and in 1842 in Union Hall, a building owned by member Winthrop Leonard. Later in 1844 another adherent offered the use of Leavitt's Hall, the Washington street site for many years of the Canton Journal. In 1845 the town voted to allow the Universalists to use the Town Hall.

In 1847 the church was still loosely organized but had enough believers and finances to build a church at the corner of Washington and Mechanic Streets. The resulting building, dedicated in 1849, was modeled on the Universalist church in Foxboro and was an aesthetic gem. It was remodeled and redecorated in 1891 and rededicated in January 1892. The cornerstone for a Parish Hall was laid on July 29, 1900 and the hall dedicated on December 17th of that year.

The First Universalist Parish of Canton was officially reorganized and incorporated on February 3rd 1849 with thirty-three families. There was an impressive list of incorporators including: Uriah Billings, John Cram, James Shepard, Vernon A. Messinger, Lawton Smith, Charles S.

## Unitarian and Universalist Ministers in Canton, Massachusetts

---

Fowler, Charles Leland, William Mansfield, Samuel Chandler, **Charles Mellen**, Daniel Tisdale, Lorenzo H. Smith, Johnathon Messinger, Joel Holmes, Francis W. Deane, William Morse, Stephen F. Tilson, C. H. Harlow, and Virgil Messinger. Other families prominent in the parish in the years to come were the Wentworths, Seaveys, Shaws, Endicotts, Munsons, Danas, Winslows, Jennisons, Lincolns, Maxwells, Reeds, Leavitts, Pooles, and Hays.

The church members were well regarded in the community for their honesty, integrity and fair business dealings. It was a small but closely knit congregation, well described by long-time member, Marian Maxim, "There was such a happy neighborly feeling when you went in, a feeling of fellowship. Everyone was involved."

Between 1849 and 1869 membership growth was slow, but beginning with the pastorate of **George W. Perry** in 1868 there were substantial membership increases. In the next thirty years there were to be two hundred baptisms. In addition to Perry, notable ministers were **Edwin Davis** who was here from 1870 to 1878 and **John Vannevar** who was immensely popular in his tenure from 1884 to 1892.

Even in the first years of the church, it was recognized that there were many tenets held in common with the Unitarians. In fact in the 1850's an attempt was made to unite with the Unitarian Church. The idea was considered inexpedient and abandoned for another one hundred and twenty years. At the banquet in 1899 marking the fiftieth anniversary of the 1849 founding of the parish, the chairman, Charles Endicott, gave a tongue-in-cheek definition of the differences between the two religions. He lightly said, "Universalists believe that God was too good to damn them, and the Unitarians believe that they were too good to be damned."

There were two Universalist ministers who had a profound influence on the congregation and on the town. They were Reverend Doctor **Charles Conklin** and Reverend J. Lonsdale Dowson. Conklin was pastor here from 1923 until his death in 1930. He also had a joint ministry with the Universalist Church in Foxboro and had held that post since 1910. He was a powerful and persuasive preacher and had occupied many vital offices in the larger church. Born in 1855 in Nyack, New York into a Dutch Reformed family, he had trained to be a lawyer. He converted to Universalism and decided on a vocation in the ministry. He studied at St. Lawrence University and was ordained in September 1876 at Mount Vernon New York where he became pastor. He later served in Troy, Chelsea, Chicago, Boston, Springfield and Brookline. He then had the honor being the State Superintendent of the Universalist Church of Massachusetts for twelve years

Conklin received a Doctor of Divinity from St. Lawrence in 1904 and a Master of Arts from Lombard College in Galesburgh, Illinois. In 1915 he established the Doolittle Universalist Home for Aged Persons in Foxboro. He was also for many years the Recording Secretary for the Massachusetts Federation of Churches. In October 1926 the Canton and Foxboro churches celebrated his fifty years in the ministry. He was fittingly honored by all the townspeople for his

## Unitarian and Universalist Ministers in Canton, Massachusetts

---

many accomplishments, not the least of which was preaching three times per Sunday for half a century. While he served both the Canton and Foxboro congregations, his heart and home were in Canton, and it was there at 1212 Washington Street that he died of pneumonia on May 27, 1930 at the age of seventy-five.

**J. Lonsdale Dowson** also had a long ministerial career and spent fifty-three years of service of which the last eight years were at the Canton church. He was a gentle, kind and truly religious person without flamboyancy and dedicated to the good of his parish. He came here from Woodstock Vermont in September 1939 and was honored by being made the first Pastor Emeritus in June 1946. He then lived on Walnut Street with his wife of forty-nine years and his son, Hugh, a popular instructor at Canton High School.

As noted earlier there were many commonly held beliefs between the Unitarians and the Universalists. Attempts at merger reached achievement with the establishment of the Unitarian-Universalist Association in 1960 and a formal merger in 1961. Events in Canton largely followed the same pattern, as the two churches shared the same minister since 1964 beginning with Reverend **William Jacobsen** and continuing with **John Hay Nichols** and **Kenneth Phifer**. An area Sunday school began in 1968 and there were often joint services as well as socials. In July 1973 the two churches appointed a Consolidation Committee to consider meager possibilities. The co-chairmen were Edmund Colson of the First Parish Unitarian and Donald Cooke of the Universalist. Members from both churches were Fred Clouter, Betty Govatsos, Queenie Holmberg, F. Everett Knowles, Sam Lange, Walter Landon, Eleanor Leathers, Lincoln Munson, Dorothy O'Brien, Reverend Kenneth Phifer, Dr. Julius Rubin, Lillian Staples, Mary Lou and Robert Stocker, Edmund Walker and Mark Whitty.

On March 24, 1974 the Universalist parish voted to approve the merger, and the Unitarians followed the next day. The new church was to be effective July 1, 1974. The officers of the new parish were President H. Lincoln Munson; Vice President, Alan Lowry; Clerk, Charlotte Clouter; and Treasurer, Herbert Boreham. The final services at the Universalist Church were on Sunday June 23, 1974. Shortly thereafter the property was put up for sale, and on the week end of November 19 and 20, 1977 the one hundred and thirty year old church was torn down. The church bell which had last pealed in 1976 in honor of the nation's Bicentennial and the cornerstone were moved to the grounds of the First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church at 1508 Washington Street.

## Unitarian and Universalist Ministers in Canton, Massachusetts

---

### Index

Boke, Beverly Morrison (Buffy), 12  
Brownson, Orestes Augustus, 5  
Casson, Charles W., 9  
Conklin, Charles, 14  
Cullen, Brad, 11  
Davis, Edwin, 14  
Dowson, J. Lonsdale, 15  
Dunbar, Samuel, 2  
Edes, Henry F., 5  
Farber-Robertson, Anita, 11  
Fowlie, Alfred H., 10  
Gilman, Bradley, 8  
Howard, Zechariah, 4  
Huntoon, Benjamin, 4  
Jacobsen, William, 15  
Jacobsen, William Richard, 11  
Jenks, Henry Fitch, 6  
Mellen, Charles, 14  
Morse, Joseph, 2  
Nichols, John Hay, 11, 15  
Perry, George W., 14  
Phifer, Kenneth, 11, 15  
Richardson, Charles O., Jr., 10  
Richey, William, 4  
Sinclair, Thomas A., 9  
Stoneham, Elbridge Fernald, 9  
Teichert, Diane, 11  
Valentine, Cloyd Hampton, 8  
Vannevar, John, 14