
First Parish Unitarian Universalist – Canton, Massachusetts

Our History

First Parish Unitarian Universalist, Canton, Massachusetts is a consolidation of two of the oldest churches in Canton.

First Parish Unitarian was officially gathered as a separate religious community in 1717. The church sanctuary presently in use was completed in 1825 and a Paul Revere bell hung in the steeple. The Parish Hall was added in 1878 and the chapel and classrooms in 1955.

The First Universalist Church began with a series of meetings in 1806 leading to the establishment of the Norfolk Universalist Society several years later. In 1847 a church building was erected, which continued in use for 127 years.



In 1964 the two congregations began a ten-year period of shared ministry and programs, culminating in their formal union on July 1, 1974.

The Massachusetts tribe of native people who inhabited the Massachusetts Bay area was led by Chief Chickataubut when the first white settlers came to this area. In 1621, Chickataubut signed a treaty with Plymouth colony and in 1630 he consented to the settlement in Dorchester. After his death in 1633 of smallpox, his brother ceded to Dorchester the lands beyond the Blue Hills, which became known as the “New Grant.” In 1668 land in the new grant, except the portion known as Ponkapoag Plantation, which was reserved for the tribal people, was granted to settlers.

After several years of petitioning to become a separate town and establish their own church, this right was granted to the New Grant settlers in 1707. The site chosen for their first church was in what is now Canton Corners Cemetery adjacent to First Parish. In 1717 the church (originally the First Congregational Church) was gathered and dedicated with Rev. Joseph Morse as the first minister. Our stained glass windows in the sanctuary give some of the history of First Parish. We are the 14th oldest congregation in the Ballou Channing District, a position shared with Kingston, MA. Over the next 80 years as settlements expanded and were populated in the New Grant, separate towns/parishes were created: Stoughton in 1726 (which initially included Sharon and Canton), Sharon in 1765, and Canton in 1797.



Well-known names that are historically linked with this church include Roger Sherman, one of the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence and also one of that brave group who signed the Declaration. It should also be noted that the Declaration of Independence was read on the front steps of the second Meeting House. Also historically linked are Colonel Richard Gridley, who planned and helped construct the fortifications around Boston during the Revolutionary War, and other active leaders in the events that shaped the birth of this nation.

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In 1820, an act of the legislature of the Commonwealth separated parish and town government functions; thus, the law no longer required the residents to support the church and, by vote of the congregation, First Parish changed its name from First Congregational Church to the First Congregational Parish and Society. The First Parish meeting house presently in use was completed and dedicated in 1825, with a bell in the steeple cast in 1821 by Canton resident Paul Revere, and a pineapple (an 18th century symbol of hospitality) high over the front door. The Parish hall was added in 1878 and the chapel, office, and classrooms in 1955. Our sanctuary seats 360 plus a choir loft for 35 and is located approximately 1½ miles north of Canton Center.

By 1828, as was happening in many New England towns, the Canton congregation voted to become Unitarian. Ten members who preferred to remain Trinitarian formed the Orthodox Congregational Church and the group erected its first house of worship in 1830 and a second in 1860. A third was built in 1963, across the street from First Parish, the present United Church of Christ. In Canton, the Universalist congregation began with a series of meetings in 1806, ten years after the well-attended funeral of Canton's most famous revolutionary War hero, General Richard Gridley, for which the Rev. John Murray, the founder of Universalism in America, was the preacher. The Norfolk Universalist Society was founded in 1819, with 152 members. In 1847 they erected a meeting house on Washington Street at Mechanic Street (where Cumberland Farms store is now located) and reorganized as The First Universalist Parish in Canton in 1849. It was the first parish to call a woman as a minister: Isabella MacDuff, 1913-1918.



First Parish Unitarian Universalist of Canton is a consolidation of the two oldest parishes in Canton. The First Universalist Parish and First Parish Unitarian began a ten-year period of shared ministry and programs in 1964. Following the 1961 merger of the continental Unitarian and Universalist denominations, creating the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), a joint Consolidation Committee, with representatives of both parishes, was appointed in July 1963 to consider merger possibilities. The formal union took place on July 1, 1974, with the Reverend Kenneth Phifer as minister. Shortly thereafter, the Universalist church property was sold and on the weekend of November 19-20, 1977, it was torn down after 127 years of faithful service. The church bell (last heard in 1976 in honor of the Bicentennial) and cornerstone were moved to the front lawn of the “new” First Parish Unitarian Universalist - Canton. It serves to remind us of the rich diversity of our tradition.

Four settled ministers have served since 1974:

- The Reverend Anita Farber-Robertson (1980-1991) who helped establish the Canton Hot Line and later the Canton Food Pantry
- The Reverend Brad Cullen (1993-1996) who helped organize outing events and our softball games for members of all ages
- The Reverend Diane Teichert (1998-2008) who 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
- The Reverend Beverly Boke (2011-present)

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Additionally, from 1996-1998, four interim ministers served First Parish: Rev. Larry McGinty, Rev. Susan Milner, Rev. Laurel Sheridan, and Rev. Dan Hodgkiss. More recently, from 2008-2011, two interim ministers served First Parish: Rev. Bill Robinson and Rev. Cricket Potter. (Interim ministers serve during the transition period between settled ministers.)

First Parish will celebrate the 40th anniversary of its beginning as a Unitarian-Universalist congregation in July of 2014 and will celebrate the 300th anniversary as a separate religious community in 2017. First Parish Unitarian Universalist – Canton looks forward to further growth, with a typical attendance of sixty adults in worship and a Religious Education program representing children from Canton and the surrounding towns of Sharon, Norwood, Dedham, Westwood, and Randolph.

[Information cited here was drawn from the History of the Town of Canton by Daniel Huntoon, *Canton Comes of Age* published by the Town of Canton in 1997, and First Parish documents.]

Because we are such an historic (old) parish that represents the heritage of both the Universalists and Unitarians, there have been many significant events in FPUU Canton's history.

1717	New Grant settlers of Plymouth Colony gather and dedicate the First Congregational Church in what is now Canton Corners Cemetery, adjacent to First Parish. Rev. Joseph Morse is the first minister.
1806	Universalist Congregation of Canton begins to meet.
1819	Norfolk Universalist Society founded
1820	First Congregational Church changes name to First Congregational Parish and Society.
1825	First Parish meeting house, presently in use, was completed.
1828	Canton Congregational voted to become Unitarian.
1847	Norfolk Universalists erected a meeting house on Washington St. (at Mechanic St.) and reorganize as First Universalist Parish of Canton in 1849.
1878	Parish Hall added.
1913	First Universalist Parish Canton calls first woman minister, Rev. Isabella MacDuff.
1955	Chapel, office, and classrooms added to buildings.
1964	First Parish Unitarian and First Universalist Parish consolidate and begin shared ministry.
1974	Formal merger of First Parish Unitarian and First Universalist Parish as First Parish Unitarian Universalist of Canton.

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Settled Ministers of First Parish have their names on one of the stained glass windows. Following is a list of all ministers of First Parish Unitarian Universalist, First Parish Unitarian, and First Universalist churches.



Universalist, Unitarian, and Unitarian Universalist Settled Ministers

Ministers of First Parish Unitarian Universalist	
Kenneth Phifer	1974-1980
Anita Farber-Robertson	1980-1991
Brad Cullen	1993-1996
Diane Teichert	1998-2008
Beverly Boke	2011- Present

Ministers Serving First Parish Unitarian - Canton		Ministers Serving First Universalist Church - Canton	
Joseph Morse	1717-1727	Charles Mellen	1849
Samuel Dunbar	1727-1783	Charles Dutton	1853
Zechariah Howard	1786-1806	Joseph Crehore	1854
William Richey	1807-1820	Henry Jewell	1858
Benjamin Huntoon	1822-1830	George Perry	1868
Henry Francis Edes	1831-1833	Edwin Davis	1870
Orestes A. Brownson	1834-1836	Ephraim Reed	1879
Benjamin Huntoon	1841-1849	John Vannevar	1885
Robert Possac Rogers	1850-1852	Omer Petrie	1894
Seth Saltmarsh	1853-1856	Lucien Clement	1897
Nathan Henry Chamberlain	1857-1860	Oliver Fisher	1899
Edward Chipman Guild	1861-1866	C. Franklin Andrews	1902
George Fiske Piper	1867-1872	Alfred Wright	1907
William Henry Savary	1873-1885	Emest E. Carritt	1910
Henry Fitch Jenks	1885-1902	Bradley Gilman	1912
Bradley Gilman	1905-1917	Isabella MacDuff	1913
Cloyd Hampton Valentine	1918-1928	Ralph Cody	1918
Charles W. Casson	1929-1933	Samuel Frank	1919
Elbridge Fernald Stoneham	1934-1941	Harold Scott	1922
Thomas Alfred Sinclair	1942-1953	Charles Conklin	1923
Charles O. Richardson, Jr.	1953-1957	A.E. Allison	1931
Alfred H. Fowlie, Jr.	1958-1963	Elbridge Stoneham	1934
William R. Jacobsen	1964-1968	J. Lonsdale Dowson	1939
John Hay Nichols	1969-1973	Earl McKinney	1947
Kenneth Phifer	1974-1980	Wilbur Parker	1951
		William P. Farnsworth	1954
		Peter Knost	1960
		William R. Jacobsen	1964
		John Hay Nichols	1969
		Kenneth Phifer	1974

Our Universalist Heritage



First Universalist Church, Canton Massachusetts



Demolition of Universalist Church, Canton Massachusetts



Bell from the Steeple of the Universalist Church, Canton Massachusetts