

## The Unitarian Church at 200 Years

Rev. Jennifer Brooks

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The Unitarian clocktower with its golden dome and weathervane is a Nantucket icon. It greets visitors arriving by boat; and for pedestrians strolling on Main Street, its clock is more convenient than a wristwatch. Many of us see it every day from the outside, the dome gleaming in the sunshine; and at night its lantern shines, sometimes under a full moon.

But what's behind that exterior? What's the story from the *inside*? For two centuries, this building has *collaborated* in Nantucket's history. It's more than an historic structure; more than an icon. It represents generations of Nantucketers who, in their own times and ways, created not only a beautiful building filled with historic treasures, but also a "free faith" that is emblematic of America and of America's fiercely independent founders.

The Unitarian Meeting House was built in 1809. That's the year an "overflow" congregation left the *First* Congregational Church on Centre Street to move into the *Second* Congregational Meeting House. The official records say that the location was "more convenient" for those churchgoers who lived on the south side of Main Street. But there's *got* to be more to that story.

What led to the formation of the church in 1809? Why is it today called the "Unitarian" Church? And what does that history mean for the Unitarian Church at 200 years?

As with any meaningful historic inquiry, these questions are not trivial. They reflect a deeper concern: what causes change? What motivates human beings to *re-make* their world? Who were these people, our forbears here on Nantucket, and what connections do they have to us today? One thing I'm sure of is that we don't have all the details. But history records some of the larger events surrounding the decision to build a new church on Orange Street, and the Nantucket Historical Association has journals and other records from those early years. They offer some clues to the motives behind the decision.

### The Decision to Build a Second Congregational Church

So let's start with this question: What led to the formation of the Island's *second* Congregational church in 1809? I'll take it in three parts: the world, Nantucket, and American religion.

***The World.*** In 1809 Thomas Jefferson was president. America's place in the community

of nations was, to say the least, insecure. It was just a little more than 30 years after the Declaration of Independence.

For the new country, the world was not a friendly place. Russia, France, and Denmark were at war with Finland and Sweden, and Tsar Alexander the First annexed Finland. Britain and France were at war, France under Napoleon's leadership. Thomas Jefferson hoped to keep the young nation from becoming embroiled in the European wars.

But Britain ordered its trading partners not to trade with the French, and just the year before a British warship had attacked and overcome an American ship to capture alleged British deserters who were most likely American citizens.

So the US Congress passed the Embargo Act, a law forbidding foreign imports and prohibiting American ships from calling at foreign ports without the express permission of the President. The idea was to use economic sanctions to force the warring nations to respect American neutrality and the autonomy of American ships at sea. It was a long shot, but as Jefferson said, "We are not to expect to be translated from despotism to liberty in a featherbed."

*Nantucket.* Whale oil still fueled the world, and Nantucket whaling ships dominated the whaling industry.<sup>1</sup> Nantucketers relied not only on whales but on American neutrality in the European wars so that whale oil could be traded for goods from around the world. When the Embargo Act was passed in 1808, it forbid exports and greatly limited trading in foreign ports.

It would be a disaster for Nantucket.

In May of 1808 official instructions had not arrived for US Naval officers stationed on Nantucket to begin the embargo, and Nantucket ships were hastening to set sail before being required to post security equal to double the expected value of ship and cargo. In a journal preserved in the collection of the Nantucket Historical Association, Obed Macy wrote in 1808:

"The state of war and the actual taking place of the embargo puts such an aspect upon our affairs as we have not witnessed since the revolutionary War. Very little or no market for manufactured oil or candles, the laboring people are generally idle

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<sup>1</sup> It's unlikely that anyone on Nantucket noticed, but in February 1808 there was a discovery that would energize America's industrial revolution: coal was burned for the first time in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

for want of business, our Nantucket seafaring men are coming home for want of business abroad.”

Five months later, in October 1808, Obed Macy wrote:

“The war in Europe still rages, and with increasing destruction of mankind ... The English orders in council and the French decrees are so pointedly against the American States that it is by our government a prudent and necessary measure to continue the embargo, which accordingly is kept on; although it is almost a total stoppage to commerce, and a great deprivation to all classes of people, the Merchant in shipping off his goods and receiving returns, the Farmer in selling the surplusage of his farm, the Mechanick in finding sale for his wares, the common laborer the daily means of his and his families support; Nevertheless from a conviction that War would be the inevitable consequence if the Embargo was raised, ... more than two thirds of the inhabitants are decidedly in favor of the measure.”

Nonetheless, by early 1809, Macy reported, the minority opposing the Embargo had become so agitated “that there are grounds to fear an insurrection.” Even as he worried about war in Europe and insurrection at home, on the next page he noted the names of six Nantucketers who had begun building houses and mentioned that “a new & very large Congregational Meeting House is begun.”

In those economic hard times, and with the constant threat of war, Nantucketers began building a new Meeting House. It was a big step, a risky step. There must have been a strong motivation for taking it—something more than the desire for more room in the pews.

**Religion.** A generation before 1809, New England’s Congregational ministers unanimously supported the American Revolution, urging “freedom from tyranny.” So vehement were they in their pulpits on Sunday mornings, wearing their plain black clerical garb, that in England they were called George Washington’s “Black Regiment.” One memorable example was the Reverend Mr. Johann Muhlenberg, who capped his sermon by pulling off his robe to reveal his uniform.

But after the Revolution, the unanimity that had masked significant religious divisions faded. The “conservative” or “orthodox” view was Calvinist, while the religiously liberal view was strongly committed to the idea that every human being is entitled to use mind and reason to read and understand the scriptures. In the face of division, positions

hardened. Congregationalists polarized, and a compromise from half a century before was called into question.

The first Puritans had expected a clear religious experience of each other: to enter into covenant as a member, people were required to admit their sinfulness and report a distinct “conversion”—a moment when they “saw the light.” But this public “confession” was unappealing to second- and third-generation New Englanders.

The compromise was the “Half-Way Covenant.” It allowed “upright” citizens who had grown up in the church to be full members without reporting a conversion. This “Half-Way Covenant” came to Nantucket in 1767 with Rev. Bezaleel Shaw.

Nantucket’s Congregationalists knew that the Half-Way Covenant had its practical uses—as the years passed, its more relaxed standards to allow the congregation to bring in new members of “high standards, wealth, and integrity.”<sup>2</sup>

But by 1800 the controversy between conservative and liberal Congregationalists had emerged and hardened. The Conservatives heatedly called into question the “Half-Way” Covenant. It seemed to allow religious liberals a way to become full members without admitting their views openly.

Who were the “Liberals”? The two most notable liberal theologians of the time were William Ellery Channing and Henry Ware; Channing at Boston’s Arlington Street Church and Ware at Hingham.

In 1805 the Harvard Board of Overseers appointed Henry Ware to the Hollis Professorship of Divinity. It was a controversial and divisive appointment. Religious conservatives saw this move as the end of Calvinist orthodoxy from Harvard-trained ministers and 1808 formed the Andover Theological Seminary to ensure that religiously *conservative* congregations would be able to find ministers.

On Nantucket, where the Half-Way Covenant had been controversial from its inception, religious conservatives pressed to revoke it. From a pragmatic standpoint, the Half-Way Covenant had allowed expansion of membership to 200 families. During the harsh economic times of the Embargo Act, maintaining and increasing church membership was of great practical importance. But as 1808 drew to a close, Rev. James Gurney *revoked*

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<sup>2</sup> “First Congregational History,” Nantucket Historical Association, typewritten manuscript found in the file “History of the First Congregational Church.”

the Half-Way Covenant. In 1809, members of the Congregational Church would be required to offer up their conversion experiences or withdraw from membership.

In 1809, members of the Congregational Church built the “Second Congregational Meeting House” on Orange Street. They chose a minister, Seth Swift, from that hotbed of religious liberalism, Harvard. Yes, he was a Calvinist. But most likely he was “liberal,” not conservative, and most likely the founding members of the congregation did not expect to put a personal conversion experience on public display as a condition of membership—the Half-Way Covenant would be retained.<sup>3</sup>

### **Why is it called the “Unitarian” Church?**

The Reverend Mr. Seth Swift and the founders of the Second Congregational Church may not have been orthodox Calvinists, but they were not necessarily Unitarians.

Today the signboard outside the church starts with “Second Congregational Meeting House” and tags on “Unitarian Universalist” almost as an afterthought. How did it get the name ‘Unitarian’? The answer has two parts, the “global” and the “local.” I’ll start with the global part, and compress hundreds of years of history into a few minutes, and then go on to the local part, which only covers a few years.

**Global.** From the very earliest years of the history of Christianity, people did not agree on doctrine.

The “Apostles Creed,” recited in most Protestant churches today, may date back to the 2nd century. The Council of Nicaea met in 325, called by the Roman Emperor Constantine to settle once and for all disagreement on Christian doctrine, produced a version of what is now called the “Nicene Creed.” The “Athanasian Creed,” which may have originated in the 6th century (the date is disputed), is today used mostly in the Roman Catholic Church, although but the Anglican Book of Common Prayer specifies 13 days each year when the Athanasian Creed must be recited.

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<sup>3</sup> I have not found documentary evidence that the Second Congregational retained the Half-Way Covenant. I think it is highly likely that Rev. Gurney’s revocation of the Half-Way Covenant for First Congregation stimulated half the congregation to form a new church, and thus the new church would have retained the Half-Way Covenant. There are other reasons I have this view (explained in the section on religious history and Harvard). The First and Second churches kept doctrinal issues out of the official records, which explain the formation of the second church simply as an “expansion,” but perhaps it’s no surprise that people who live on an island might work hard to be civil, at least in the official records. There must have been a reason why Rev. Gurney decided it was important to revoke the Half-Way Covenant.

What all three creeds have in common is that they specify what believers must believe. Whatever reservations may lie in the hearts of those who recite them, they are recited as outward proof of adherence to orthodoxy. Of the three creeds, the earliest one, the Apostles Creed, is the shortest and most general; the Nicene Creed, next oldest, is a bit longer with more details of doctrine; and the newest, the Athanasian Creed, is the longest and has the greatest number of specific doctrinal statements. As time went on, church authorities tried to counter “heretical” thinking by inserting more specifics into the creed.

Fast forward to the Protestant reformation in the 16th century. Religious leaders like Martin Luther began to call for the “reform” of the Roman Catholic Church. Luther and other early reformers meant only to change practices they thought were corrupt. They steered clear of differences in doctrine.

But Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press in the mid-1400s made printed copies of the Bible widely available, and soon it was available in a variety of languages, not merely in Latin. Ordinary people began reading scripture for themselves rather than simply hearing bits of it in church. As the general idea of reform took hold, a broader sense of “reform” developed, and soon there were not only “Lutherans” but also followers of John Calvin, who was based in Geneva, Switzerland. Calvin’s movement was often called the “Swiss Reformed Church.” It is the predecessor to the Calvinist churches of the Puritans, and in America those Calvinists built the New England Congregational churches.

But long before the Puritans sailed, in 1566, an Eastern European king found himself caught up in the Protestant Reformation. In Transylvania (which is now part of Romania but then was its own kingdom, and was home to the Magyar people who also settled in Hungary), King John II listened to scholarly debate about religious differences. These debates, which went on for several years in the city of Torda, were a major topic of popular conversation.

The public discussions at Torda led to heated debate among ordinary people about the differences between Catholicism, Lutheran Reform (Lutheranism), Swiss Reform (Calvinism), and the so-called “Reformed Church of Transylvania” (sometimes called “Unitarian”). Most of the debate centered around the relationship between Jesus and God. Was Jesus the son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit at about the time of his appearance on Earth? Or was Jesus part of God since the beginning of time, along with the Holy Spirit, and thus the three-in-one “Trinity” for all eternity?

These issues had arisen since the beginning of Christianity, and had led to the development of the three creeds. But during the Protestant Reformation, and especially

400 years ago in Transylvania, ordinary people argued over the idea of the “trinity” in public debates, over lunch, after dinner, and before breakfast. Historians have learned that religious debate was a frequent cause of fistfights in taverns. I suppose some of those participants were the first Unitarians.

People who considered themselves biblical literalists challenged the idea of the “Trinity” as it was expressed in the Athanasian Creed. They said there was no scriptural basis for the idea of three beings. They were called Non-Trinitarians, or Anti-Trinitarians, and (more and more often) “*Uni*-tarians” (“uni” meaning “one” in contrast to “trini” meaning “three”). But the hallmark of their religion was not the trinity. They wanted to get away from non-biblical doctrine and return religion to a way of life based on Christian principles. Jesus was their prime example of how to live, and their slogan was “Jesus as Exemplar.”

Out of this seething hotbed of religious inquiry came the 1568 *Edict of Torda*, King John’s declaration of religious tolerance: no one could be hurt or blamed or lose a job because of religious beliefs, because (in the words of the declaration) “faith is the gift of God”—*not* something a government can require. King John himself was the first (and perhaps the only) Unitarian king; the Edict of Torda is the world’s first governmental declaration of religious freedom.

The debate over the Trinity seems weirdly narrow to many people today. These so-called “Unitarians” believed in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit; their quarrel with orthodoxy was mainly over the use of the Athanasian Creed, and the Nicene Creed in its later versions, because neither is supported by the literal text of the Christian “new testament.”

***Back to America.*** The Pilgrim churches in America were Calvinist with a strong Trinitarian orthodoxy. They were called “congregational” churches because each congregation chose its own minister and adopted its own covenant (typically a statement of religious principles). These were not Anglican churches with the hierarchy of bishop and archbishop; the Pilgrims were religious dissenters who disagreed with Anglican ways. They had an antipathy to creeds imposed by denominational councils. Each congregation made its own decisions. Each congregation’s covenant, which it might look a lot like a creed, was different because it was a statement agreed upon by the members.

This “congregational” form of church governance in America allowed the development, over the years, of a more moderate form of Calvinism, a so-called “liberal” Calvinism. In the early 1800s, two key ideas began to flourish in many Congregational churches: “Jesus as Exemplar” and tolerance for a variety of opinions about the Trinity. The flourishing of

these views caused the split between the “orthodox” and “liberal” Congregationalists in the early 1800s.

***Meanwhile, Back on Nantucket.*** In 1809 the Second Congregational Meeting House organized itself with a typical Calvinist covenant, but with less stringent standards for membership (keeping the Half-Way Covenant), and with a Harvard graduate as its minister—both signals of “liberalism” to Congregationalists of the time. But those who attended probably did not think of themselves as “Unitarians.” They would have considered themselves merely “liberal” Calvinists. The term “Unitarian” was in use, but it had a derogatory edge, and the organizers did not formally specify any theological or philosophical differences between Nantucket’s First and Second Congregational churches. Technically, there weren’t theological differences between the orthodox and the liberals...just differences in what they were willing to talk about.<sup>4</sup>

***America.*** Ten years later, New England’s leading “liberal minister,” William Ellery Channing, claimed the derogatory name “Unitarian” as a positive evocation of a new and more inclusive spirit. His 1819 sermon was called “Unitarian Christianity.” He encouraged the idea of Jesus as Exemplar, free inquiry into religious matters, and the use of reason in the interpretation of scripture. Reason, which 400 years ago had supported a “plain text” interpretation of the bible, gradually led away from biblical literalism and encouraged greater tolerance for differing views.

Channing’s provocative and inspirational words prompted conflict, controversy, and ultimately the division of New England’s Congregational churches into two distinct groups: conservative or “orthodox” Congregationalists, and liberal or “Unitarian” Congregationalists.

In 1834 the Congregational church in Harvard Square adopted a new covenant that allowed someone to be a member without agreeing fully with all the Calvinist ideas. It is considered the first “Unitarian” covenant. It didn’t use the word “Unitarian”; mainly, it wasn’t insistently Trinitarian. Instead its centerpiece was the “intention to live a holy, religious, and useful life, after the example, and in the spirit of” Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup> It is a fascinating phenomenon that the “liberal” Congregationalists were not willing to talk publicly about their conversion experiences or other aspects of their personal religious experience (thus they liked the Half-Way Covenant), but they insisted on talking about the literal content of the New Testament, which did not include the doctrine of the Trinity. At this point in America’s religious history, biblical literalists were the “liberals” and were opposed to a public “born again” stance.

This covenant re-focused congregational life. Beliefs, theories, and doctrines about the nature of God and Jesus were less important in this covenant than the way people lived. It elevated the idea of living according to Christian principles and ethics. This Unitarian covenant, referred to as the “Harvard Covenant,” spread rapidly through Congregational churches.

*Nantucket.* In 1834, as the Harvard church adopted its Unitarian covenant, Rev. Seth Swift was retiring as minister of the Second Congregational Society. Rev. Henry Edes was chosen as the congregation’s new minister. Three years later, in 1837, the Nantucket congregation adopted the Harvard Covenant (the “Unitarian” covenant) and implicitly became Unitarian. Even though the church’s name remained the same, Second Congregational, it’s likely that people began calling it the “Unitarian Church.” After all, the congregation’s adoption of the notoriously “Unitarian” Harvard covenant was big news, probably shocking, and perhaps a little scandalous. Pointing to the clocktower, they may have said it this way: “*That’s the Unitarian church.*” The name stuck.

But back in 1837, what did it really mean to be “Unitarian”? The members in 1837 may still have thought of themselves as liberal Calvinists and perhaps they used Channing’s proud term “Unitarian Christians.” It seems likely that the members struggled with the problem of self-definition. They modified the Harvard Covenant, the church’s second covenant, several times between 1837 and 1875, adopting a third, fourth, and in 1875 a fifth covenant. But despite these revisions to the covenant, its centerpiece remained the focus on living life in an ethical and principled way. And, ever since the 1837, the covenantal language allowed room for theological diversity and for the discussion and exploration of religious ideas.

It’s interesting to see the self-consciousness in the Harvard Covenant. It’s a bit defensive and careful in its wording, emphasizing Jesus as the Son of God. Only in the “fifth covenant” of 1875 (which then remained in place for more than a century, until 1987), do we sense the distance Unitarians had come from the defensiveness of that first Unitarian covenant. The 1875 covenant isn’t a reaction to orthodox Calvinism. Instead it has its own clarity of purpose—a clarity evident in its emphasis on living in right relationship with one another, and in its commitment to building the “Beloved Community” here on Earth. Let me read it:

*“Regarding Jesus of Nazareth as our spiritual Teacher and Guide, we desire more faithfully to follow Him, to possess more of His spirit, to be true to our age and mission as He was true to His, and to cooperate with each other in building up the*

kingdom of God on earth, and in establishing the reign of righteousness, truth, and love among men. For this purpose we join ourselves together.”<sup>5</sup>

This covenant does not require and does not prohibit any theological doctrine. It simply affirms the ethical teachings of Jesus while neither embracing nor challenging the divinity of Jesus or Trinitarian doctrine. It says “Jesus of Nazareth” rather than “Jesus the Son of God.” Instead of a focus on doctrine, its attention is on the here and now, on how we live. By setting aside doctrinal issues in favor of shared values, the 1875 covenant gave the church’s people the “space” to form in their hearts their own understanding of, and connection to, the mystery of life.

## **The Unitarian Church at 200 Years**

How has this history made the Unitarian Church what it is today at 200 years?

***The Covenant Today.*** The hallmark of the church’s covenants prior to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (specifically, prior to the 1987 covenant) was the way they all embody the 16th-century struggle with the idea of the Trinity. The role of Jesus—God, Son of God, “Jesus as Exemplar,” dominates the text. Despite the broadening of the covenantal language over the years, before 1987 it remained obviously rooted in the Christian tradition. In the 1987 sixth covenant, revised after more than a century of the 1875, the membership (and the world) had changed enough that a new focus was necessary.

One change in the larger world was that the Unitarian and Universalist<sup>6</sup> denominations merged in 1961.<sup>7</sup> By 1987 it was more than time to acknowledge the merger in the words of the covenant. So the membership adopted a new covenant, briefer still, and one that remains in place today with only minor revisions.

At 200 years, today’s covenant expressly affirms Unitarian Universalist principles and purposes (reflecting the 1961 merger). It then adds, quite simply, “we unite in the freedom of truth and in the spirit of love for worship and for service to humanity, to our community, and to each other.”

The words of this 20th-century covenant are far different from those of the 1834 Harvard Covenant. But its simplicity is fully in keeping with the ideals of those who struggled to

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<sup>5</sup> Second Congregational Meeting House Society, Nantucket MA, 1875 Covenant (its fifth covenant).

<sup>6</sup> There was a Universalist congregation on Nantucket, founded in 1824. The Universalist Society building was located at the corner of Federal and Pearl (now India) Streets. It was purchased for use as a public library and lecture hall in 1834 (the “Atheneum”), and was destroyed in the 1846 fire that swept through Nantucket Town. The existing Atheneum now stands at the same site. Georgia Ann Snell, “A Brief History of Religion on Nantucket,” in *Historic Nantucket*, vol. 50, no. 1 (Winter 2001) pages 19-22, available online at <http://www.nha.org/history/hn/HN-snell-religion.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> The two denominations, after a century of discussion, in 1959 voted to merge. The merger was achieved in 1961.

free themselves from the oppression of doctrine. Both covenants affirm the belief that human beings have the freedom to choose how to live, and that how we live matters. This sense of responsibility for choosing how we live is reflected in the “seven principles” of the Unitarian Universalist Association (the organization of member churches that is our denomination).

### **The Seven Principles.**

What are these seven “Unitarian Universalist principles”?

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The “seven principles” aren’t written on stone tablets. They were first adopted in 1984 are subject to review every 15 years. They represent the best efforts of a thousand UU congregations to state the values that we share as Unitarians even though as individuals we may have different religious backgrounds, different theologies, and different religious practices. They arise organically from the basic conviction shared by America’s founders that religious freedom is a basic human need.

The Unitarian Universalist principles, new as they are, emerged naturally from the frustrations and longings of the same men and women who, 200 years ago, built a new “large Meeting House” during times of economic hardship because they refused to put their inner religious experiences on public display for examination and judgment. The idea that human life is in large part a search for meaning and purpose; the idea that every human being has inherent worth and dignity: these fundamental notions were at work in 1809 and shape the activities, programs, and worship of the Unitarian Church at 200 years.

It’s a beautiful building. But it’s not the building that makes the church. It’s not the building that’s important, but what happens when it’s filled with people, as it does not only on Sunday mornings but also for many community events. Over the years, the congregation has mourned the death of Lincoln and cheered Frederick Douglass. The seekers that make up this congregation have invited speakers to challenge and stimulate

our thought and our vision. Flowing from the covenantal belief that it matters how we live (in our time and in our world), the Unitarian Meeting House serves as a community gathering-place for the exploration of American traditions, our religious heritage, and the newest of new ideas.

At 200 years, the Unitarian Church celebrates the Island's characters; its bell rings the Island's shared history; and in collaboration with other local faith communities its members work for social justice. Today we sing our songs and tell our stories, but also sponsor essential programs for youth (including a non-denominational human sexuality education program for Island teens). In our Sunday morning services, we honor a variety of religious traditions and teach young children to have an open mind, a warm heart, and helping hands.

The Unitarian Church at 200 years carries on a long tradition of freedom of conscience that promotes moral and spiritual development. Its doors are open wide to those who seek meaning and purpose. At 200 years, the Unitarian Church on Nantucket celebrates the potential and promise of every person.