

“Sermon” for Unitarian Church, Feb 23, 2014

What a nice mix – Unitarians and the African Meeting House. This is a fitting spot to reflect upon Nantucket and its important part in civil rights history during black history month.

We are sitting in an important place in our community. This building was the heart of New Guinea, where most people of color lived. At its height there were about 500 black people living in this neighborhood; they established two separate churches, boarding houses, stores, and, up the hill, a cemetery. The building we are in was built as both a church and a school.

The school, called the African School, opened in 1826, a year before the town at large created its system of public schools, despite the fact that it was breaking state law. The African School was then absorbed into the school system, although it remained segregated.

This building remained a school for black children into the early 1840s. Then, as the town refused to integrate, black leaders refused to let the town continue to use the building as a segregated one-room schoolhouse while the children of white Nantucketers had access to the four levels of town schools – introductory, primary, grammar, and high schools. The school committee built another school down the street.

When my former student Kat Grieder called me and asked if I would give a talk about school integration with a focus on the role played by Unitarians, I decided to give it a go. For today’s talk I have written something a little different not just a summary of the story in my book *A Line in the Sand*. I have tried to

meld the story about school integration with what I have found in the last five or six years of my research on the life of Cyrus Peirce. I knew that he was involved in the school integration case, but little else about his life. As I delved into the life of this remarkable man, it was quickly apparent that I had to learn a lot about Unitarianism, as it was his Unitarian philosophy that guided his life and sheds light on the other Unitarian reformers.

Peirce, the first principal of Nantucket High School, became Horace Mann's righthand man, chosen within a year by Mann to design and teach the curriculum for the first public teacher training institution in the United States. Thus, Peirce taught the first group of specifically trained teachers in our country, and the curriculum that he designed was copied by all the other teachertraining, or normal schools established around the country.

The opposition that Mann and Peirce faced in creating the normal schools stemmed directly from their Unitarian principles, as the conservatives in the state tried very hard to undermine their effort, fearful that a Unitarian conspiracy was afoot.

First, a bit of background. The Massachusetts Bay Colony was established as a theocracy. From the beginning, however, there were internal and external challenges to church doctrine, hardly surprising in a colony founded upon the ideal of religious freedom, or at least freedom for the Puritan dissenters who had fled English persecution.

During the Great Awakening of the 1740s, two groups of dissenters sought to reform Christianity in Massachusetts. Both questioned who had the

authority to interpret Scripture and both took interpretation of the *Bible* out of the hands of ministers and placed it in the hands of individuals. Evangelical dissenters preached an immediate, personal, and emotional spiritualism. The second group, the rationalists, took an opposite approach, equally troubling to the Puritan establishment - by then called Congregationalists. The rationalists applied reason to Christianity, undermining the blind faith then expected from congregants.

Jonathan Mayhew, minister of the West Church in Boston during the mid-1700s, belonged to the rational school of thought. Mayhew was an outspoken critic of the concept of the Trinity, preaching the idea of a single, monolithic, or Unitarian god. Some consider West Church to have been the first Unitarian church in America, although the label "Unitarian" had not yet come into use.

By the time the U.S. Constitution was written in 1787, Massachusetts had absorbed Methodists, Quakers, and other mostly Protestant faiths into its religious mixture. These new religions presented more challenges to the Massachusetts theocracy.

The established church in Massachusetts continued to be Congregationalist, but a gulf between liberal and conservative factions within the church had widened by the turn of the nineteenth century. Besides questioning the notion of God and the Trinity, liberals called Arminians also challenged the concept of original sin and the idea that all people are born with its stain. They doubted the idea of eternal damnation, skeptical that God would condemn people

to everlasting Hell. Rather than view God as “angry,” they viewed Him as benevolent, another departure from the orthodox Congregationalists.

An even more radical group questioned the divinity of Jesus Christ, speculating that Jesus was a mortal man, not a deity. This belief especially was considered a serious heresy, as it called into question the literal truth as written in the New Testament upon which Christianity was based.

By 1800, these rifts could not be ignored, and Congregationalist communities began to splinter. Harvard, which had trained generations of Congregational ministers, was dominated by Unitarian thinkers and considered a “hot bed of heresy” by the Congregational establishment.

The conservatives had few tools to use against their liberal brethren because of the organizational structure of Congregationalism, which has no central authority or governing board. Their from-the-bottom-up organization invited freethinking, if their dogma did not.

This left considerable power to individual congregations, which appointed their own ministers. Ministers, in turn, were free to choose which doctrines to emphasize and which to ignore in their sermons and homilies. Such free license meant that congregations were easily divided, depending upon whom they had hired as their ministers. The remnants of these splits are reflected in towns such as Nantucket across New England with their many First and Second Congregational churches. The majority of Second Congregational churches represent the liberals who split with the more orthodox congregations.

The Second Congregational Church was established on Nantucket in 1809. With its more liberal leaning, the congregation had split amicably from the more conservative First, or North, Congregational Church. So friendly was the split, the minister of the First Congregational Church gave the dedicatory prayer at the dedication of the Second Congregational Church. Seth Swift, the first minister, only in his 20s, had been one of Cyrus Peirce's contemporaries at Harvard and is probably the reason that Peirce came to Nantucket after graduation.

By the early 1820s, about one-third of the Congregational churches in Massachusetts had become Unitarian, although the break was not formalized until 1825. The Second Congregational, or South Church, on Nantucket officially became a Unitarian church in 1837, about a dozen years after the Unitarians had formally split from the Congregational Church and only a few years after the state stopped being a theocracy.

Understanding Unitarian philosophy is key to understanding the proliferation of reform movements before the Civil War. Unitarians represented a disproportionate number of intellectuals, writers, transcendentalists, and politicians and their influence grew. What was it about these Unitarians?

For one, Unitarians rejected the belief that Heaven is reserved for a chosen few. They also rejected the belief of the depravity of man. Instead, Unitarians embraced an optimistic view of mankind, and of God. This empowered them to take an active role in their own fate and the fate of society.

Their optimism that society could and would improve became a trademark. Unitarians believed in progress. They led movements for humane treatment of prisoners, the insane, and the disabled. They worked to clean up slums. They were leaders in the temperance and peace movements. They were early advocates of women's equality and suffrage. And, they were leaders in the crusade to abolish slavery.

To many Unitarians, nothing was more important than public education. They believed that all other reforms would come about through education. It was logical that if people were properly informed about society's ills, they would naturally work to rectify them. And the place to start was in childhood. Unlike the Congregationalists, Unitarians believed children needed to be nurtured, not treated with harsh discipline and this was reflected in educational reform that was child-centered, not teacher-centered.

According to the historian Conrad Wright, "Unitarians were remarkable even among Yankees for their devotion to education. It is no exaggeration to say that such Unitarian religious leaders considered the school as sacred an institution as the church."

It is not, then, surprising that the white reformers on the island were disproportionately Unitarian. Some were former Congregationalists and many were former Quakers. Quakers may have been early opponents of slavery, but the issue of abolition divided them in the 19th century. Members of the Society of Friends were in turmoil over the extent to which members should become involved in secular political affairs. Splinter movements arose, the largest being

the Hicksites who spoke against slavery and who were expelled, or “disowned” by the orthodox Quakers. The most famous Hicksite abolitionist was island-born Lucretia Mott.

Many local abolitionist leaders were disowned by the Nantucket Society of Friends. The husband-and-wife team of Eliza and Nathaniel Barney, and local schoolteacher Anna Gardner, were disowned, as were Maria Mitchell and her father William. The vast majority of them became Unitarians.

Until the establishment of their own churches, blacks on Nantucket attended other local, but segregated, churches. The Second Congregational Church recorded most of the early black marriages, including the marriage of Absalom Boston to Phebe Spriggins in 1814, ten years before the New Guinea community established a church of its own. (Boston became one of two black whaling captains to hail from the island and became the wealthiest member of the New Guinea community.)

Back to the school controversy. It was not until 1838 that Nantucket voted to fund a public high school. As was the norm back then, students had to pass a qualifying examination.

The following year, Eunice Ross, daughter of African-born James Ross, passed the examination to enter the high school. She was the star pupil of Anna Gardner at the African School. Gardner was the secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society and went on to an illustrious career in the South during and after the Civil War, setting up teacher-training schools for freedmen and women.

However, when 17-year-old Eunice Ross passed the examination to go to Nantucket High School, the school committee denied her admission because she was black.

In a special town meeting in June 1839, a motion “to permit coloured children to enter all or any public schools” was soundly defeated. This was the opening salvo in a battle over school integration that dominated town politics for eight years, dividing neighbors and families.

The controversy reached into every corner of our community. The Atheneum, a private institution, closed its doors to blacks for two years. In response, abolitionist and Unitarian Obed Barney opened an Anti-Slavery Library over his store on Main Street, inviting everyone in town “free of expense” to avail themselves of an “extensive collection” of anti-slavery literature, as good, he boasted, as could be found anywhere in the country.

Nantucket’s school controversy also attracted unwanted off-island attention. In July 1841, David Ruggles, a well-known black activist from New York, was forcibly thrown off the steamboat when he refused to ride in the second-class section.

During the 1840s, the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society hosted a traveling convention that scheduled yearly visits to Nantucket every August. To avoid what had happened to Ruggles the previous month, the interracial group of visiting abolitionists traveled en masse and everyone was allowed to sit in first class. The group that summer included young Frederick Douglass, who delivered his first-ever address to a mixed-race audience at the Atheneum. His firsthand

account of his life as a slave so impressed the leaders of the Massachusetts Anti-slavery Society that he was hired as a public speaker. Thus his illustrious career as a civil rights spokesman was launched on Nantucket.

Meanwhile, the local abolitionists continued to try to integrate the schools. At the annual town meeting in January 1842, 56 men ran for the school committee, including 10 black men - among them James Ross and Absalom Boston. Unfortunately, a majority of the seats went to segregationists, and the schools remained segregated.

The failure at that town meeting prompted the black community to gather at Zion Church, up by the windmill, long since torn down. They wrote an address to the "Inhabitants of the Town" asserting their right to have "their youth educated in the same schools which are common to the more favored members of this community." The lengthy address elicited no response, even though it was printed in the island's papers and in William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*.

The situation heated up the next August when the traveling abolitionists came back to town for a six-day meeting. Speeches made at this explosive convention alarmed Nantucketers. Garrison denounced the Constitution as an "agreement with Hell," and Stephen S. Foster delivered what is known as the "Brotherhood of Thieves" speech. Next time you go by the Brotherhood, take a close look at the sign and make note of the slave in chains and money in the hands of a minister. Foster accused northern clergy as complicit in the crimes of slavery because of their affiliation with southern churches. In language shocking for the era, he called the ministers "pimps of Satan." These words inflamed a

mob that gathered outside the Atheneum over the next two days. On the second day, they broke windows and several people were hurt by bricks and broken glass. The trustees of the Atheneum felt it necessary to close its doors to the abolitionists, forcing them to reconvene at Franklin Hall on South Water Street. However, they were again attacked by a mob, and somewhat hastily left the island.

The situation did not improve the next year. The annual town meeting of 1843 dragged on for days with rancorous debate over school integration. While the town did not vote to integrate the schools, abolitionists, mostly Unitarians, gained a majority on the school committee and integrated the schools anyway. Fifty-one students, both black and white, attended the primary school on York Street, and black children were admitted to grammar schools around town. Eunice Ross did not attend the high school, probably because she was in her 20s by that time.

The segregationists were furious that the committee had ignored the explicit vote of town meeting and were well prepared for the next year. The abolitionists were overwhelmingly voted out in 1844 and the next school committee re-segregated the schools within weeks. The 15 black children attending the two integrated grammar schools were publicly ejected. The principals were ordered to “call out the colored children, from their seats into the aisle” where the chair of the school committee told them they were “no longer members of this school, but are dismissed entirely. A school has been provided for you in York Street. You must go there.” They left to taunts and jeers. Cyrus

Peirce, then principal of one of the grammar schools, resigned in protest before having to participate in the expulsion.

It is hard to imagine the anger and embarrassment of the children and their parents at the public expulsion. They resolved to fight on. Since school integration had failed at town meetings, it was time to try something new.

The first response was to boycott the school system, a tactic used effectively a century later in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. The school boycott was so well supported that the York Street school was vacant. To keep it open, the school committee was forced to assign white students to go there. To ensure that boycotting children continued to learn, a room was rented for them in town staffed by volunteers - undoubtedly most of them were Unitarians.

In addition to the boycott, the black community turned to the state for redress. Edward J. Pompey, the second black whaling captain from Nantucket, and "104 others" from New Guinea submitted a petition to the Massachusetts Senate and the House of Representatives in mid-January describing the "insults and outrages upon their rights." Two petitions arrived shortly thereafter in support of the Pompey petition, signed by over 200 white Nantucketers. It reads like a who's who of abolitionists and Unitarians. The anti-integrationists submitted two opposing petitions arguing that the black children of Nantucket had been provided "an excellent school" and that there was no reason for the legislature to pass "untoward legislation."

The most amazing petition of all arrived in Boston next, written and signed by only one person. Eunice Ross, in a firm and legible hand, described how she had qualified to enter the high school but had been refused “on account of her colour.” (I have a copy here)

The state lawmakers agreed with Ross and her fellow petitioners, and in 1845 they passed the first law in the United States to guarantee equal education to all students - giving their guardians the right to sue their towns for damages.

It would seem that the battle had been won and that it was time to celebrate. But amazingly, the town refused to integrate the schools, claiming that the York Street school was, in fact, equal, an argument echoed in the infamous separate, but equal, *Plessey v. Ferguson* Supreme Court case in 1896.

Absalom Boston prepared to sue the town on behalf of his daughter, 17-year old Phebe Ann. The town prepared to defend itself in court. Meanwhile, the boycott went into its second year as the lawsuit worked its way slowly through the judiciary. However, the boycott was weakening, and black children began to trickle back to the school on York Street.

It seemed as if everyone on Nantucket was waiting for an outcome of the Boston lawsuit. Debate over school integration was conspicuously absent at the 1846 town meeting, but surprisingly, abolitionists won a majority on the school committee. Confident that the law was on its side, the committee moved quickly to re-integrate the island schools. This time there was no backlash; Absalom Boston's suit was dropped, and black and white children have attended Nantucket schools together ever since.

Unitarians have a rich heritage of working for social & economic justice.
(Refer to the Historians Against Slavery movement today.....)