

Journal of Unitarian Universalist History

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Nicole Kirk
Meadville Lombard Theological School
610 S. Michigan Avenue
Chicago, IL 60605

Patrice Curtis
611 S. Ft. Harrison Avenue, #303
Clearwater, FL 22756

Kathleen Parker (*Journal Editor*)
6606 Rapid Water Way, Unit 103
Glen Burnie, MD 21060

Gail Forsyth-Vail
UUA – 24 Farnsworth
Boston, MA 02210

Rali Weaver
670 High Street
Dedham, MA 02026

Editor's Note

In Volume 42, we are excited to feature four articles on our Universalist forebears. In the first selection, an eighteenth-century story from Philadelphia, we learn of Christopher Marshall, a pharmacist and bibliophile who promoted Universalist writings, obtaining and distributing works among receptive contacts in Europe and North America. Spencer Wells demonstrates the extent of prejudice Marshall faced on account of his views, especially from Quakers who objected to Universalism. Marshall's contentious view of John Murray as a trouble maker eventually softened as the two men became friends, in spite of their differing views on universal salvation.

In the second selection, Jay Kiskel takes us to South Carolina and introduces us to the genealogy and fluidity of religious groups who migrated to that state in the eighteenth century. They came from England, Switzerland, Germany, and parts of North America, progressing over time toward Universalism. Objections from other groups led the Brethren to keep their Universalist views closeted until the early nineteenth century, when they began to speak publicly with a profession that ultimately respected the right of conscience. Even then, a lack of preachers limited the growth of Universalism in South Carolina, as did dissension over slavery in the era of the Civil War. Rebirth did not occur until the 1880s.

The "vignettes" offered by Monica Dobbins offer glimpses of three Universalist preachers in Alabama whose ministry was affected by the currents of their time. In the antebellum ministry of George Rogers, we learn how mostly rural white Universalists resisted complaints by northern Universalists about slavery. Echoing Kiskel, Dobbins maintains that this limited Universalist growth at that time. Quillen Shinn came to Birmingham in 1895 and participated in a period of Universalist growth. The rural churches he established, however, did not transition to urban church growth after World War I. The Universalist Church of the Messiah, founded in Birmingham in 1917 by Richard

Smith, lost the support of the white-dominated State Convention for unclear reasons. Dobbins suggests this was due to its radical theology and the fact that it sponsored a ministry to African Americans.

Family support for Universalism is demonstrated in Kenneth Wheeler's account of the Strain and Rhyne families, who were connected through marriage, a saga that began in the 1850s with German iron-maker families who migrated to Walesca, Georgia. The sons and grandsons of Jacob Rhyne and James Strain, husbands sequentially of Katherine Stroup, became Universalist preachers who traveled across the state and into Texas, Alabama, and Mississippi. The culminating event occurred when grandson Rev. Almon G. Strain engaged famously in "The Discussion" of 1907 with Baptist minister Rev. J.J. Porter, D.D. at the Burruss Universalist Church, founded by Strain in the town of Fellowship, Mississippi. Citing hundreds of biblical texts over six days, they debated the question of punishment after death. Wheeler's observation – that the dissenting tradition of Universalism was linked to a larger pattern of cultural dissent – is apparent in this article.

From the Unitarian side of our past comes William Ichabod Nichols, a minister and AUA president (1837-1844) who rejected Transcendentalist interpretations of divine revelation. Harvey Hill relates Nichols' story to the larger question of biblical authority. At a time when Unitarians were debating the arguments of Emerson and Parker and the influence of German theologian David Friedrich Strauss, Nichols took the "road less traveled." His work, *Hours with the Evangelists*, argues that the "facts" of the gospel writers confirm "the highest impulses of the human spirit" and offer a "trustworthy rule of faith and practice." Nichols died in 1859, before the Civil War and before Darwin, his work no longer discussed in academic circles after that.

Mordecai De Lange left the Judaism of his birth, converted to Unitarianism, and entered the third class of the new Meadville Theological School. His one year of study, completed in 1847, qualified him to serve as a minister-at-large to Unitarian societies in towns sprouting up along the Mississippi and

Ohio Rivers. Basing her research on the letters De Lange wrote to AUA leadership for the next three years, Kathleen Parker exposes the tenacity of De Lange as a missionary, as well as the status of pre-Civil War Unitarian missionary work in the early West. Earnest and resolute in his devotion to the “ineffable” cause of Unitarianism and voicing a Unitarian Christian view in keeping with that of Ichabod Nichols, De Lange’s urging encouraged greater AUA attention to western churches and coincided with the timely emergence of ministerial graduates from the Meadville school.

In addition to these rich articles, this issue of the journal features twelve book reviews, four of which contribute to a provocative “forum” of conversation around Mark Morrison-Reed’s much-awaited account of the Black Empowerment Controversy. We hope these reviews will participate in a larger ongoing dialog about this critical event that continues to challenge us in our time. The remaining reviews highlight strengths and insights found in other books that link our Unitarian Universalist and liberal religious history to the theological and social justice questions we face today.

KRP

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Contributors to Volume XLII

Monica Dobbins is the Assistant Minister of the First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City. A native of Birmingham, Alabama, she graduated from Meadville Lombard Theological School in 2017. Her work in Salt Lake focuses on religious education, hospitality and membership, and social justice. She also serves on the steering committee of the People's Justice Forum, a Utah citizen lobbying group. She lives in downtown Salt Lake with her spouse and daughter, and enjoys hiking and textile arts.

Harvey Hill is an Episcopal priest living in western Massachusetts with his wife Carrie Baker, a direct descendant of Ichabod Nichols. Before his ordination, Harvey served for fifteen years on the faculty in the department of Religion and Philosophy at Berry College, Rome, Georgia. His research revolves around the question of how traditional religious denominations in Europe and the United States have responded to modernity and secularization in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

After a 35-year career in IT, Jay Kiskel turned his attention to the study and preservation of early Unitarian and Universalist history in the South. He is a member of the American Society of Archivists and the Society of Georgia Archivists, and has digitized collections of congregational records. Jay has been active for three decades in congregational affairs and the Mid-South District, as well as the UU retreat center in Highlands, NC, and is currently president of the Universalist Convocations. He is also an avid long-distance bicyclist. During the summer of 2018, he completed a 3,867-mile cross-country cycling trip from Seattle to Savannah.

Kathleen Parker moved this past year from Pittsburgh to Glen Burnie, MD, enabling her to spend more time with her children and grandchildren. With electronic assistance, she continues to teach history at the University of Pittsburgh and at La Roche College. She holds a PhD in American Studies from Michigan State University and is author of *Here We Have Gathered: The Story of Unitarian*

Universalism in Western Pennsylvania, 1808-2008 (2010) and *Sacred Service in Civic Space: Three Hundred Years of Community Ministry in Unitarian Universalism* (2007). She has served as editor of the *Journal of Unitarian Universalist History* since 2010.

S. Spencer Wells graduated with a Ph.D. in history from the College of William & Mary in 2018. His dissertation is entitled "'Heathen Men and Publicans': Excommunicates, Church Discipline, and the Struggle for Freedom of Conscience, 1730-1840." He currently works as a Research Scholar and Executive Assistant for the University of Virginia's Forum on Religion and Democracy in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Kenneth H. Wheeler is Professor of History at Reinhardt University in Waleska, Georgia. He lives in Waleska, and in Birmingham, Alabama. A graduate of Earlham College, he earned his Ph.D. at The Ohio State University. He is the author of *Cultivating Regionalism: Higher Education and the Making of the American Midwest* (2011), and a forthcoming book from University of Georgia Press, *Modern Cronies: Industrialization in the Cherokee Country from Gold Rush to Convict Labor*.