

UNITARIANS AND UNIVERSALISTS ON MARTHA'S VINEYARD

1640 TO 1860

When we retired to Vineyard Haven in 2000, I had time to think about how little I knew of Unitarians and Universalists in general, and, in particular, how they became established on Martha's Vineyard. It seemed unlikely that a large group woke up one morning in 1898 and said, "Today we will establish the Unitarian Society of Vineyard Haven". There had to have been some previous exposure to UU ideas, and, if so, what and how did this occur. If ours is an evolving faith, as we often say, from what and whom did we evolve? We often look into the present and the future, but seldom into our roots. I wanted to look at this solely from the perspective of the Vineyard since this, after all, is the center of our universe. This is what I found.

Our roots are with the Puritans (called Congregationalists) who came to Boston in 1630. According to Conrad Wright's, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America*, they were sure that John Calvin of the Age of Reason was right and their community was righteous. They believed the "innate bent of all men is toward sin, that God has decreed everlasting happiness to some and external torment to others, and that salvation comes as the unmerited gift of God's Holy Spirit". Good works did not earn salvation.

Having left England because of lack of tolerance of their beliefs in England and Holland, they came to Boston to establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and they themselves' became extremely intolerant. They cast out Quakers and Baptists. There was one poor soul living in Boston when they got there, farming on what is now Boston Common, but he, too, couldn't stand them and left for other parts.

In the beginning their members were closely banded together as they faced a new life in a potentially hostile environment. There was no time for questioning as they struggled to become a safe and healthy community.

Once established, the Mass Bay Colony was eager for more settlements. Thomas Mayhew of Watertown received grants to settle Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket from both the Earl of Sterling and Fernando Gorges, thinking it wise to receive grants from both as these lands were in dispute between the two; he wanted to ensure his legal rights.

Thus, Thomas Mayhew, Jr., twenty-one years old, came with other settlers from Watertown to Great Harbor (Edgartown) in 1642. Gov. Mayhew (as he later came to be called), came to live there four years later. He had stayed behind to take care of other affairs.

Thomas Mayhew Jr. had a natural theological bent. Banks' *History of Martha's Vineyard* records that Thomas Jr. liked to preach, but as there were too few settlers to satisfy his yearnings, he also preached to the Indians. We have to assume that perhaps he was modifying the Congregational/Calvinist theology to suit his situation, but this is not known.

Thomas Mayhew Jr.'s fifteen year mission among the Native Americans is legendary. In the beginning, the Christianizing of the Indians was one of the ideas of settlement and was taken seriously by the Mayhews but only paid lip service by other communities. Letters describing the Mayhew efforts were sent to England where The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England had formed and offered financial aid.

In 1657 Thomas Jr. went to England to attend to an inheritance of his wife and to make further reports to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England, but his ship was lost at sea. He had become very popular with the Indians, who, legend says, bid him farewell upon his departure at the Place by the Wayside, (on the Edgartown - West Tisbury Road near the airport); in future years stones were left there to mark the site in remembrance.

Preaching to and schooling of the Indians was taken up by other Mayhew's, until the time of Thomas Sr.'s great grandson, Experience. The bond between the Native Americans and the Mayhews was such that the Native Americans did not join the late 1600's Indian uprising known as the King Phillip's War. The first men from the Vineyard to attend Harvard (established in 1640) were Native Americans proving that the Mayhew schooling was effective. Geraldine Brooks will publish a novel in May, *Caleb*, about one of these scholars. They also died early.

Experience Mayhew was a most interesting man. He was bilingual from childhood speaking English and Wampanoag. This was an age when the custom was to have one's sermons published, and these were the popular reading of the day. Experience's sermons were so much admired that Harvard awarded him with a Master of Arts degree even though he had never attended. His missionary work among the Indians gained him an international reputation. He translated psalms with one page of English opposite the page of the same psalm in Wampanoag. (These are one of the many sources being currently used to re-establish the Wampanoag language by Mrs. Josie Little Doe Baird, a Wampanoag of Mashpee. She has a PhD in linguistics from MIT and has recently been awarded a McArthur grant). In later years the Wampanoag language was lost as subsequent missionaries insisted that the Indians use only English.

Experience was determined to send a son to Harvard and sent his eldest, Nathan Mayhew, who graduated in 1727. Sadly, he died two years later.

Experience Mayhew was determined to have a son who was a Harvard graduate to preach to the Indians and sold some land to make this possible. His second son, Zachariah, was not academically inclined, so he sent his third son, Jonathan in 1740. Jonathan became

the most influential and famous Vineyarder of whom we probably have never heard.

We must now understand that in the evolving theology of the mid 1700's, the terms "orthodox" and "liberal" refer to branches of Christian Congregational, theology.

Because of his profound national influence upon what became liberal Christianity and also upon the political thinkers of the day (just before the Revolution), I am probably going to tell you more about him than you might wish to know. This young Chilmark farm lad expanded the barriers of theological and political thought and made significant contributions to both fields at a pivotal time in our national history.

Jonathan excelled at Harvard; his early schooling is thought to have been provided by his father. Instead of returning to the Vineyard to become a missionary to the Indians, as perhaps Experience had hoped, Jonathan eventually became the minister of the West Church in Boston.

In the early 1700s the Boston clergy had been the city leaders for a hundred years. They were the elite; their sermons were widely read and discussed. Except in Boston, each small town had one Meeting House, the minister expected to stay in his pulpit for life and to be paid by the town. By this time there were very occasional Baptist, Quaker, and Church of England congregations. Church attendance had waned by the late 1600s, people were feeling more secure and became more diverse in their interests. This was so serious that a Synod was held to reverse the lack of church attendance.

However by 1735 there was a time of revival called the Great Awakening, which, when reading about it today, sounds very much a time of flux and change very similar to the upheavals that took place in the 1960s. Revivals were held and there was a time of great religious enthusiasm. ("Enthusiasm" was NOT a word of praise at the time.) Shockingly, preaching was done by men who had no need of education as "God put words in their mouths".

Jonathan Mayhew arrived in Cambridge in 1740, in time to take part in the revivals, but the enthusiasm abated quickly. However he became a friend of a fellow student, Charles Chauncy, and many others who were questioning the status quo. These challengers of the orthodox were called Arminians after a Dutchman of similar views who espoused that individuals have free will and can create their own salvation by their deeds. They were outside the orthodoxy of the times. Others in Europe were exploring Unitarian Universalist theologies, but they were not thought to have influenced the examination of ideas taking place in Boston at the time.

Later, after reading Jonathan Mayhew's writings, Newton, Locke, Priestly, and others in England exchanged views with Arminians in New England; frequent exchanges of ideas and writings occurred between the two countries. They questioned the theology of

original sin, wished to examine the Bible for themselves on religious points and, in general, questioned the established order.

This brings to mind the statement of Garrison Kiellor that the real symbol of Unitarians is the question mark.

Chauncy and Mayhew excelled at Harvard. Chauncy was less confrontational and was appointed to the First Church in Boston. Jonathan Mayhew was an in-your-face orator and had difficulty for a few years finding a pulpit. He eventually was accepted by the West Church in Boston, a congregation only ten years old, consisting of many newly successful merchants. His ordination was a shockingly painful event. Jonathan was much admired by the general population, but established churches in Boston declined to send their ministers to the ordination due to Jonathan's unorthodox views. The ordination had to be postponed. On the next date chosen, Jonathan's father, Experience, came from Chilmark to give the charge, Rev. Ebenezer Gay (a friend, mentor, and fellow liberal) came from Hingham to give the sermon, and enough other clergy came from towns surrounding Boston to make the occasion respectable.

Jonathan Mayhew was ostracized socially by the other Boston clergy and was not a member of the Boston Association of Congregational Ministers. Although the term "Unitarian", was not used until the 1800s, ("Liberal Christian" was the term used at the time), the Arminians challenged the Trinity. They also questioned political orthodoxy. In 1760 Jonathan published "Discourse on Charles the First and the Doctrine of Passive Resistance and Non Resistance", which, along with his published "Seven Sermons" became widely read and much admired by Whigs and clergy in England. Jonathan wrote, "All commands running counter to the declared will of the supreme legislator of heaven and earth are null and void: And therefore disobedience to them is a duty, not a crime". (*Called Unto Liberty, A Life of Jonathan Mayhew*, Charles W. Akers, Harvard, 1964)

Thomas Hollis, an English benefactor of Harvard, was particularly impressed, and had large numbers of these writings printed. Jonathan was given an honorary degree by the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. Later, according to Charles Banks' *History of Martha's Vineyard*, President John Adams called him "the transcendent genius of his day" and said of him, "Dr. Mayhew seemed to be raised up to revive all the animosity of the people against tyranny within Church and State and, at the same time, to destroy their bigotry, fanaticism and inconsistencies". Ten years later, Jonathan Mayhew's ideas were used as rationale for resistance to British rule.

Jonathan Mayhew unfortunately died in 1766 at age 45. Although it had been difficult to find sufficient numbers to come to his ordination twenty years before, it is reported that 700 attended his funeral. He had become very popular, in part for his stance against bishoprics for the Church of England, which were seen as interference by the monarchy. Charles Chauncey prayed at his funeral, a huge departure from the Calvinist avoidance of praying for the dead.

He was survived by his wife, Elizabeth Clark, of a good Boston family “remarkable for her beauty and for her accomplishments”. They had two daughters. She later married his successor at West Church, Rev. Howard. It is not known where Mayhew was buried.

Charles Akers wrote, “As a way station between the Puritanism of John Cotton and the Unitarianism of William Ellery Channing, Arminian theology occupies a significant place in the history of American religious thought”. “Jonathan Mayhew helped Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson justify revolution by the theory that ‘All men are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights’”.

Now it is time to return to the Vineyard. By now the religious influence of the Mayhew’s had waned. The towns Edgartown (which included what is now Oak Bluffs, and Tisbury (which was then centered in what we now know as West Tisbury) were established; Chilmark was soon to be. Aquinnah was “Indian Lands”.

Moving up to the late 1700’s, we find this was a time of great hardship for Vineyarders. Gray’s raid during the recent Revolution had taken all the livestock and other provisions and left the island impoverished. The English had promised payment, but it had not come.

The island had been without a settled Congregational minister when Mr. Joseph Thaxter of Hingham was hired in 1781 to “preach to the town” of Edgartown. He and Rev. Ebenezer Gay, noted for his Liberal Christian views and also of Hingham, were well acquainted; Rev. Thaxter perhaps was also influenced by Rev. Gay’s Liberal Christian tendencies. This is the same Rev. Gay who had come to take part in Jonathan Mayhew’s ordination.

Rev. Thaxter was the only settled minister on the island and also the only provider of medical assistance. He’d taken some medical training before studying to become a minister. He was particularly good at setting broken bones.

Rev. Thaxter had graduated from Harvard in 1768. Legend has it that he financed his education with the winnings of a lottery ticket. He had taught school in Hingham and had been a chaplain to Col. Prescott’s regiment at the Battle of Bunker Hill. When he came to Edgartown he was thirty-seven and unmarried. He had been ordained the year before. He stayed forty-six years. His house still stands at the corner of Cooke and Pease Point Way. The Meeting House is no longer, but was situated in the cemetery, across the street from his house.

As he began his ministry, he was upset by itinerant Baptist and Methodist ministers who preached occasionally and recruited members of his flock. These were, according to Banks, “a continual thorn in his flesh”.

Banks further states "Parson Thaxter, as he was known, was the last of the old school village pastors, the guide, philosopher and friend of his flock from the cradle to the grave. He ministered to them in their physical ills as well as leading them in the spiritual paths, and for forty years was the most distinguished personage in Edgartown". He must have been picturesque because he "wore to the end of his life the cocked hat, short clothes, knee and she buckles, and carried a long cane familiar to the generation that lived during the Revolution".

About half way through Rev. Thaxter's ministry, in 1807, Rev. James Freeman spent a year on the island to make a survey of it and its peoples. I will tell you more about him later, but he was a most interesting Unitarian Minister from Boston and spent much time with Parson Thaxter as the latter knew the island well. Perhaps it is because of this friendship with a Unitarian that Parson Thaxter is regarded by many as the first real "Unitarian" on the Vineyard and, when Banks notes this, he also says that the Parson's Congregationalist congregation, with affection, considered him a "gentle heretic".

In 1836, ten years after Parson Thaxter died, a Unitarian Minister, Rev. Samuel Adams Devens, spent a year in Edgartown. Writing about his sojourn there, *Sketches of Martha's Vineyard and other Reminiscences of Travel at Home, etc.*, he recounts that Parson Thaxter "read much, Greek every day", that he "suffered from migraines but was absent from the pulpit only five times in forty-seven years", "He wrote twenty-five hundred sermons during his lifetime, did one fifth of the work of his house and made his own water pails". "He was in the habit for many years, of walking from Edgartown to Holmes Hole to preach or lecture on a Sunday evening and crossed to Chappaquidick for a like purpose". "He led a simple life: it was a maxim of his that brown bread and black tea were enough for ministers". "He was a man of natural eloquence and gifted in prayer".

Because Parson Thaxter had been Chaplain to Prescott's regiment at Bunker Hill, he was invited to take part in the Fiftieth Year celebration of this event, the laying of the cornerstone for the Bunker Hill Monument in 1825 and, according to Banks, "was designated as the official Chaplain to offer prayer, in the presence of the distinguished Marquis de Lafayette. His venerable appearance on that occasion attracted general attention and incited public comment. His prayer was reported in all the current papers of the time".

Parson Thaxter died a year later (1826) and for nine years there was no settled minister on the island. He had married twice and his wives are buried with him. His grave is across the street from his home, behind what was the Meeting House at the time.

We should now return our attention to the Rev. James Freeman, the Boston Unitarian Minister who came to Edgartown in 1807, and his remarkable story. Although he only spent a year on the island, his influence upon Parson Thaxter and his service to island history are profound.

After the Revolution, Rev. Freeman was ordained by the Church of England King's Chapel, the first Episcopal church in New England. He could not be ordained by a bishop; that would have meant a trip to England as there were no bishops in the Colony. The previous King's Chapel minister had to leave because he was a loyalist. Gale Huntington wrote in the Martha's Vineyard Museum periodical, *Intelligencer*, "Rev. Freeman leaned toward Unitarianism, having been influenced by Jonathan Mayhew. Rev. Freeman asked his congregation to excuse him from reciting the creed and expressed doubt to a few friends about the Trinity. The friends suggested that he preach about the unity of God, stating his dissatisfaction with certain parts of the liturgy, and giving his reasons for rejecting the Trinity. Rev. Freeman did and thought he would be dismissed but the congregation supported his views and the liturgy was altered, eliminating all references to the Trinity and addressing all prayers to God the Father. The Chapel was the first in America to make such changes. On that ground, it might be considered the first Unitarian Church in the country". Kings Chapel later became known as the Stone Chapel.

When Rev. Freeman came to the island in 1807, it was to make a survey of the island on behalf of the Massachusetts Humane Society (dealing with humans, not animals). (An early example of Unitarian Social Justice outreach?) The Society, noting the large the number of sailing ships passing through Vineyard Sound, knew that many shipwrecks occurred due to storms, rocks, etc. The Society was intent on setting up huts along the beaches. This is before there were any lifesaving stations. It was thought if a sailor swam to shore and knew that he could find basic shelter on the beach at intervals, lives might be saved, as several had been lost due to cold and exhaustion while the sailor was looking for help on our sparsely populated island. Rev. Freeman wrote a detailed account of the island as he found it, and all fifty pages are printed in the *Intelligencer* of May 1971. This account is invaluable to historians.

He noted that in 1807 in Tisbury (of which Holmes Hole was one small village) there were 193 houses, 219 families, 162 Congregationalists, one Quaker, one Roman Catholic, and fifty-five Baptists. Rev. Freeman noted the island was still recovering from the impoverishment of Grey's Raid.

Rev. Freeman frequently visited Parson Thaxter to elicit his aid, as the Parson knew the island very well. It is thought that during these visits much theology was discussed, and Parson Thaxter's Unitarian leanings became more firm.

Rev. Freeman promoted Unitarianism outside the Stone Chapel as well. His preaching in Baltimore in 1816 led to the organization of the Unitarian Church there, at which Rev. William Ellery Channing gave his pivotal 1819 sermon. Rev. Freeman met every two weeks with twenty Liberal Christian ministers in the Boston area which led to his being appointed to a committee charged with the creation of a formal body. The work of this committee led to the founding of the American Unitarian Association in 1825.

According to *Heralds of a Liberal Faith*, it is not possible to fix a definite date for the beginning of the Unitarian movement in America. The movement was a gradual evolution. However, four dates in the first quarter of the 1800s are landmarks in the development of Unitarianism in America:

1. Henry Ware, a Unitarian, was elected Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard College.
2. William Ellery Channing preached a sermon at Baltimore, the first positive declaration of the Unitarian position. Until this sermon, "Unitarian" had been used as a derogatory term, Channing changed it to a positive one.
3. David Reed provided in "The Christian Register" a channel for the declaration and diffusion of liberal principles.
4. The American Unitarian Association was founded by Ezra Stiles Gannet, James Walker, and Henry Ware, Jr.. The purpose of this Association was in no sense sectarian, but simply to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interest of pure Christianity. Nevertheless, the Association was and still is, the expression of the fundamental unity of the free churches allied to the Unitarian movement and their working missionary agency.

By 1865 Henry Bellows helped the American Unitarian Association change from an association of individuals to an association of churches.

In 1833, the Commonwealth formally disestablished the Congregational Church, and the churches were free to decide whether to remain Congregational or to become Unitarian or Universalist. If such a vote occurred in Edgartown or West Tisbury, it is not known to their current ministers; perhaps the vote was to retain Congregationalism. Thus theological diversity was introduced and towns were no longer to hire and pay a Congregational minister.

American Universalism started in Europe, one of the first ministers being Dr. George de Benneville, who came to Pennsylvania in 1741. John Murray came from Universalism in England to New Jersey, from which he migrated to Gloucester, Massachusetts. He married a second time, to author Judith Sargent Murray. He sued the town, asking that his congregation be exempt from taxes to pay the minister, and won. In 1793 he became pastor of the Universalist Society of Boston where he served until 1809. It is generally thought that Universalism began about 30 years before Unitarianism. It is hard to determine an exact date for them also, as Universalist churches were more independent, national organization was at first less tight.

Universalists followed Christian doctrine but believed in universal salvation. Rev. Thomas Starr King defined the difference between Universalists and Unitarians as: "Universalists believe that God is too good to damn anyone, and Unitarians believe that they are too good to be damned".

The outstanding Boston leader of Unitarians was Rev. William Ellery Channing. He was associated with Harvard, the intellectual elite, and the upper crust of Boston. The outstanding leader of Universalism was Rev. Hosea Ballou, President of Tufts University, and the churches of this denomination were more rural.

Thanks to the Library at the Andover Harvard Divinity School, I was able to read articles from the Universalist organization periodical, the *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine*, which related Vineyard visits from Universalist ministers. The Universalists seemed eager to establish a Universalist presence on the island.

Z. Baker visited Edgartown in December of 1837, one year after the Unitarian Rev. Devens had spent a year there. Mr. Baker preached twice on Sunday and met Rev. Tilton, the Orthodox (Congregational) minister, who did not have time to converse with him. Rev. Baker preached in Holmes Hole on Tuesday, meeting Ichabod Norton, seventy-six, on the way, who related that he had been a Universalist since birth. Then he preached four miles away on the North Shore in the school house. Then back to Edgartown to preach again on Sunday, where the Baptist minister invited him to drink tea but expressed opposition to Arminianism. Mr. Baker concludes his account by writing "There are three towns, and in Edgartown there had been a Unitarian Society which is now extinct. Tisbury contains a great many Universalists." Mr. Baker took a packet on Thursday and was seasick all the way to New Bedford.

Two years later, A. Norwood writes that he had been to Nantucket and proceeded to Edgartown where he stayed eight days and preached "ten discourses in various places", Chappaquidick, Pohoganut, and Holmes Hole being mentioned. "There are about 3,000 inhabitants on the island and probably enough of them are believers in the great salvation to give good support to a zealous herald of the cross".

After a seeming hiatus of twenty years, in October 1858, Brother Bruce of Sippican, (part of Marion, Massachusetts) wrote in the *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine* an account of his visit to "one of the Isles of the Sea", exchanging his "parish labors" for the "missionary field in a destitute island". His host in Holmes Hole was Peleg Barrows. Bro. Bruce noted that a Universalist minister had not been on the island in five years, but he preached to "a hundred souls" the next night in "the Hall" as the Baptist and Congregationalists would not allow them to use their spaces even though they had no ministers at the time. Bro. Bruce spent much time with individuals and particularly noted Father Daggett, who came twice to the preaching although he was ninety-four years old. A correspondence with the Methodist minister followed but the Methodist minister regarded, "Universalism as a great and fatal error".

In April of 1859 there was a Conference of the Old Colony Association of Universalists in Holmes Hole for two days. The periodical noted, "A cordial and very earnest invitation is extended to all friends in "the region about" to attend. "The fare on the steamboat (from New Bedford) will be half price, one dollar to go and return."

In July 1859, Bro. Whittemore, editor of the *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine*, preached in Holmes Hole. He, too, was met and hosted by Peleg Barrows. Bro. Whittemore devoted Sunday morning to Sunday School and preached at 2:30 and 5:30. The Orthodox (Congregational) Church was this time available as the regular congregation had ceased services some years previously. Many people attended, including the venerable Samuel Daggett, now noted to be ninety-six. Bro. Whittemore describes the church as needing exterior painting but with very pretty frescoes inside and a handsome steeple. (At this time it was only one story high.) Bro. Whittemore visited with Bro. Bruce in New Bedford on his way home.

The next issue of the *Trumpet* quotes the "Universalist Creed, written by Mr. Samuel Daggett of Holmes Hole, presently in his ninety-sixth year":

"Upright in heart, in all their dealing just;
In God's free grace they put their only trust;
And in His boundless, universal love,
They place their hope of heaven and bliss above;
And when life's scene is drawing to a close,
Gently they drop into their last repose;
And as in Adam death o'er all does reign,
Even so in Christ shall all be raised again.

The *Trumpet* notes that Br. S. Cobb preached in Holmes Hole Aug. 28, 1859.

In March of 1860, the *Trumpet* relates "A little more than a year ago, a few friends of Universal Salvation longing for the truths -- through the assistance of Br. J. E. Bruce of Sippican, formed themselves into a Society for the purpose of reviving in their own hearts, the cheering influences of Christianity." Brother Bruce had moved to Holmes Hole with his wife. After they had been here a year, the *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine* reported their home was broken into while they were out visiting the sick, but nothing was missing. Instead "provisions and clothing items were left, accompanied by a card reading, 'From Santa Claus'".

The First Universalist Society in Holmes Hole was formed by petitioning the Justice of the Peace for the County of Dukes County, Bartlett Allen Esquire, to issue a warrant to a meeting in July of 1860 that the petitioners may then organize themselves into a Religious Society. This petition was granted and "in the name of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts", the Justice of the Peace directs the petitioners to meet "in the room over the store of Peleg Barrows on the 26th day of July instant at ½ past 7 o'clock." Peleg

Unitarian Universalist Society of Martha's Vineyard

Barrows was chosen Clerk; Joseph T. James, Moderator; Peleg Barrows, Treasurer; Geo. N. Peakes, Collector; and Benjamin Nye, Joseph Claghorn, and Joseph T. James, Assessors. Rev. Mr. Kellum, Joseph T. James, and Peleg Barrows were chosen as a Committee to draft their Constitution and By-Laws.

On August 2nd, 1860, they voted to accept the proposed Constitution. Twenty-nine male members and seventeen female members signed the Constitution as well as the statement that “any person may withdraw from the Society whenever he or she may choose by having their name erased from the Constitution“. They also voted Peleg Barrows as an agent to purchase the Congregational Meeting House in Holmes Hole (now not being used by the latter) and to convey the deed to those who purchased pews.

Thus ends 1860, with the First Universalist Society of Holmes Hole well established and the story to continue.

Sarah Shepard
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THE MISSION OF REV. DANIEL WALDO STEVENS THE FIRST UNITARIAN MINISTER ON MARTHA'S VINEYARD 1867 - 1891

Rev. Daniel Waldo Stevens came to Holmes Hole in 1867 at the behest of the American Unitarian Association as a missionary to sailors. He was forty-seven. At that time 10,000 sailing ships per year were making their way through Vineyard Sound on their way to and from New York and Boston and Holmes Hole harbor was a good refuge during storms.

Rev. Stevens graduated from Harvard Divinity School in 1848 and had been the minister of the Unitarian Church in Mansfield. However, he came to the Vineyard from his position as superintendent of schools in Fall River. His charge was to minister to the sailors who stopped in Holmes Hole harbor, many to get supplies, but mostly for safety during bad weather. Charles Banks knew Rev. Stevens, and, in his *History of Martha's Vineyard*, wrote that Rev. Stevens was "a man of strong intellect, unconventional in his methods, and full of enthusiasm."

But we must go back to 1860 to understand the setting into which Rev. Stevens came.

At this time the Vineyard had three towns, Tisbury (including what is now West Tisbury), Edgartown (including Cottage City) and Chilmark. Gay Head was Indian Lands, not yet a town. Holmes Hole was a village in Tisbury which changed its name to Vineyard Haven in 1871.

At this time Unitarians and Universalists had not incorporated Humanitarian thinking into their theology. They were firmly Christian although not Trinitarians. They were called Liberal Christians to differentiate them from the Orthodox Congregationalists of their roots.

After the Revolution and into the early 1800's, Rev. Samuel Thaxter was the Congregational Minister in Edgartown, so he was paid by the town. He had, according to Banks, Unitarian leanings, and was considered by his congregation to be somewhat of a "gentle heretic".

His ministry was followed by several itinerant Universalist ministers who visited the various island towns from time to time. The First Universalist Society of Holmes Hole was established in the year 1860. The Holmes Hole Congregational church, built in 1844, had disbanded. Their minister had moved to what we now call West Tisbury. The Universalists met in and planned to purchase the one story Meeting House, which is presently our Town Hall. Bro. Bruce of Marion, MA, was instrumental in getting them

established. Their founding congregation numbered forty-seven and had an active Sunday School. There were also Baptist and Methodist congregations in Holmes Hole. Shortly after the congregation formed, Bro. Bruce moved to Newburyport and Br. J. H. Tuller came from Essex.

The Universalist Society minutes, transcribed from the originals now in the Martha's Vineyard Museum, are available in our UUSMV library. Their transcribed By-Laws are also in our UUSMV library. We also have information about them from the *Trumpet and Christian Register*, the Universalist periodical which I was able to read at the Harvard Andover Divinity School library.

It seems that they were served once or twice by settled ministers who stayed briefly, but mostly by pulpit supply ministers. Their minutes are bare, being only of Annual Meetings when elections of officers took place. This was the situation when Rev. Stevens came to Holmes Hole seven years later.

The First Universalist Society of Holmes Hole was approached by a representative of the American Unitarian Association who offered to have Rev. Stevens provide them with ministerial services in addition to his duties the Sailors Reading Room and Chapel. It had become increasingly difficult for the Universalists to fill their pulpit. A meeting was called, the First Universalist Society of Holmes Hole voted to become the Church of the Unity under the jurisdiction of the American Unitarian Association, and shortly afterwards they were invited to send a delegate to the Channing Conference. Terms of employment for Rev. Stevens were written.

Thus the Unitarians and Universalists of Holmes Hole merged to some degree almost one hundred years before the 1961 formal merger. The Vineyard was not the only place where such partial mergers occurred.

Meanwhile, Rev. Stevens was very busy establishing his mission to the sailors. He purchased a 1740 house overlooking the harbor just down the beach from the chandlery at the end of Grove Ave. At this time, the center of shipping was the outer harbor as the sailing ships needed a lot of room to maneuver. This house was located on what was then called Union Bluff but is now Hatch Road. Mike Wallace now lives on this site. Later, according to Jim Norton's book, *Walking in Vineyard Haven*, the house was moved to the corner of Main and Locust Streets and enlarged.

Because Rev. Stevens was employed by the American Unitarian Association, he was required to send quarterly reports to them. These reports are available in the Andover-Harvard Theological Library at Harvard Divinity School, and I have read them. They are quite verbose and somewhat repetitive, so I have excerpted the parts that were pertinent, leaving out the repetitions and the fulsome polite remarks. These notes are also available in our UUSMV library.

The first letter from Tisbury invited the AUA secretary to the dedication of the Sailors Free Reading room on the 26th of August 1868. Dr. Gannet, one of the AUA founders, also came and the event was written up in the AUA publication, the *Register*.

At first Rev. Stevens had many expenses to get things set up, many financial difficulties, and progress was slow. He notes that it is "as expensive to live on the Vineyard as it is in Boston." His "faithful wife" had to go home to her family in Mansfield due to ill health. He had regular Sunday and Thursday evening services in the Reading Room and had been asked to deal with the corpse of a drowned sailor. The Church of the Unity was not able to pay him the agreed upon amount.

Two years later he reported that the numbers at services have increased, and in June of 1870 he writes that he does not charge the AUA for rent of the Reading Room, does his own sweeping, keeps fires going, travels four miles a day, (one of his services to sailors was to go to the village to post mail).

He received much hostility from the Baptist, Methodist, and YMCA congregation members who threatened, but failed, to set up rival missions. Little boys were sent to make a racket under the chapel windows when he was conducting services.

In July of 1870 he reports that he stocks the Reading Room with 26 periodicals, cuts the leaves of magazines, trims the lamps, sweeps (the sailors tend to spit on the floor), and oversees the library books, which he lends to neighbors as well as sailors. He was asked to do the funeral of a sailor who died from typhoid, and to give the address at the cornerstone laying of the Martha's Vineyard Seminary.

In 1871 there is a heartbreaking series of events. His wife, who had returned to the island, was gravely ill. We first learn that they have a three year old daughter and she, too, is gravely ill. His wife died and a grown son came from off-island to accompany his mother's body to her funeral and burial in Mansfield. Rev. Stevens had to stay with the very sick daughter who, tragically, died a few days later.

During this time the Reading Room services had increased attendance. Rev. Stevens writes of his financial difficulties "as he is paid less than when Supt. of Schools in Fall River" and had many more expenses. For example, he had to buy a heavy coat and long boots for visiting ships in winter, as most of his ministry was during bad weather. He had added another room to the mission which friends furnished. In lieu of salary, the Church of the Unity, where attendance has been "less than it should be", gave him five weeks of summer vacation.

Rev. Stevens had a poster flier in 1875. The original is in the Martha's Vineyard

Museum, and an enlarged copy is on the wall of our office. He took this flier out to visiting ships as an invitation to attend services in the Chapel and to use the Reading

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Room and library. As a departure from our usual practice, I invite you to join me in reading in unison a portion of the very liberal and welcoming invitation he extends to sailors:

“All seamen, of whatever nation, and the public are earnestly invited to visit the above named institution and to attend public worship there Sunday forenoons and evening, and Thursday evenings. Bell rings half an hour before service. Free seats. Free gospel. No contribution-boxes. No respect to persons on account of dress, color or religious opinions. “The word of God is not bound” to any sect, party or nation.

In front of the premises there is a good wharf affording about seven feet of water for landing, also at the head of the same there is a well of fresh water and all the means for filling casks in boats. All seamen, yacht clubs, and the public are cordially invited to make use of all these privileges (worship services, museum, Reading Room which has twenty-five different newspapers giving the marine news for the Atlantic Coast, and others representing the religious views of several Christian sects, and the library which contains eleven hundred books) free of charge.

Rev. Stevens further stated that there was a museum of Indian relics and “all sailors are invited to aid in securing marine shells, minerals, fossil remains and curiosities from all parts of the world. Indian relics and all things relating to the early history of Martha’s Vineyard are especially desirable.” Although Charles Banks stated that Rev. Stevens’ son gave it to the museum in Bristol, RI, I have been unable to find what happened to this most interesting and valuable collection.

The Reading Room library with its eleven hundred books was free to borrowers for two weeks. Later Rev. Stevens noted frequently that this was the largest free library on the Vineyard at that time. He was careful to note that he provided publications from all the mainstream religions, not just Unitarian. A fire to warm the room was provided, and it

must have been of great comfort to sailors on a cold, wet and windy day.

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He provided materials for writing letters and took them to the town post office daily which is a walk of one mile each way. He also provided U. S. Coast Survey Charts and Tide Tables, "direct from Washington, for sale at Government prices."

The free water for filling casks was piped to the end of the dock enabling the casks to be filled without removing them from the dories. The nearby chandlery charged ten cents per cask and provided no piping.

He took meteorological observations for the Smithsonian. Prof. Agaziz of Harvard, well known biologist of the time, persuaded Rev. Stevens to ship turtles to his assistant in Cambridge.

The AUA provided free tracts from the AUA for the sailors to read. These were available in the Reading Room and also delivered to the ships. Some titles were: "The Oiled Feather", "The Man Who Kept Himself in Repair", "The Power of Soap and Water" and "The Beliefs of Unitarians". Bibles were also provided by Massachusetts Bible Society.

Hostilities by Baptists and Methodists gradually diminished. Rev. Stevens was invited to be the chaplain for the Marine Hospital (perhaps because he is neither Baptist or Methodist). Neighbors and children from the village were borrowing books from the library and neighbors supplied a Christmas tree. Rev. Stevens gave free lectures illustrated by sciopticon. During one lecture about John Calvin, he made an effort to "make sure everyone understood how heinous John Calvin's crime against Michael Servatus was". Some summer visitors came from the Campground. Letters of praise were received from ship Captains and several donations. An organist was hired. By 1875 he was chairman of the Vineyard Haven School Committee "because intellectual cultivation is a strong ally of Unitarianism".

Changes were noted: In 1875, a new road made it possible to get to the Campground in only three miles instead of going around the Lagoon or taking a boat to Eastville. Churches were closed during the summer as everyone was going there, but the Chapel remained open.

The arrangements with the Church of the Unity collapsed, the church records noted that Rev. Stevens was insufficiently attentive and the reports of Rev. Stevens state that he was never paid the agreed upon amount. The minutes of the Church of the Unity end in 1880.

The Dukes County Educational Association met in the chapel for three days with distinguished off-island speakers.

He preached in Christian town. The Society for the Propagation of the Faith compensated

him for his ministry to Indians. He was finally provided with a horse and carriage.

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He became moderator of the Vineyard Haven town meeting.

As the chapel and Rev. Stevens' ministry were picturesque and of human interest, articles were written about it in the mainstream press. Summer visitors were more numerous.

Rev. Stevens is known for possessing a "Breeches Bible" of 1599, - a valuable collector's item first printed in Geneva in 1560 in which the translation states that "The eyes of Adam and Eve were opened and they beheld that they were naked and they sewed figge tree leaves together and made themselves breeches". He also owned the "*Shepherds Sincore Convert*" in the Indian language, by John Elliot.

Rev. Stevens preached twice to the Methodist Campground and was invited to fill the pulpit in the Vineyard Haven Methodist Church.

In 1878 he became the island agent for the Shaw Asylum for Mariners' Children, and this became one of his most treasured tasks, as he was able to use the institution's funds (several thousand dollars over the years) to assist many destitute families when the sailor who is head of the household has died or become ill. He explained to all recipients that Robert Shaw was a good Unitarian.

In 1880 the first Unitarian Cape Cod Conference met on the Vineyard, in the Campground, thanks to Rev. Stevens making the arrangements.

The following December neighbors put up a Christmas tree and townspeople sent 50 presents (for the seamen).

Rev. Stevens had become the president of the Vineyard Haven Literary Association which purchased and met in the old Congregational Meeting House which is now known as Association Hall and, later, became the Town Hall. The Universalists had voted to purchase this building and sold pews to do so, but there is no record that they actually did.

In 1883 he feared that the new Episcopal Church, (which was located on this plot of land), would siphon off some of the townspeople who had been attending the Chapel services during the summer.

A new town Brass Band was formed. They marched a mile to give him their first

serenade.

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He was glad that his friends were damaged only slightly when the Vineyard Haven Main Street burned. His check went astray because the post office was demolished.

Rev. Stevens noted an increased number of summer visitors (many from mainland Unitarian churches), and many new homes in his area of town. There is no mention of Rev. Antoinette Brown Blackwell, the first woman Unitarian minister, who summered in Chilmark.

There were fewer ships as more shipping was by steam engine. His health had declined and he had resigned as Pres. of the Dukes County Educational Assoc., Chairman of the School Board and Chairman of the Finance Committee but remained President of the Literary Association.

In 1887 he reported that "a Boston Company has introduced Water Works and bought 600 acres of land for housing lots". This would become the West Chop community. In December there was a celebration of the Water Works and Rev. Stevens was asked to give the main address. He noted that some of the people building houses were Unitarians, but he did not know if they would benefit the mission. He described an increase in summer visitors, but a decrease in the number of sailors. Steam ships did not have the same need to seek shelter in our harbor during storms.

Now, twenty years into his mission, he noted, "I wish I had more strength and less years". At the same time he was pleased to have been asked to give the principle address to a July 4th gathering of one thousand "Sons of Martha's Vineyard" celebration in Edgartown.

His reports continued through January of 1891. I don't know what happened to him between January and the time he died ten months later.

He died here on October 1st, 1891 and was buried in Marlborough where he was born. Rev. Stevens never remarried. Sometimes his niece lived with him and did his cooking; sometimes he "boarded out" in the neighborhood.

The Vineyard Gazette reported on October 9th, "Mr. Daniel Stevens (Rev. Stevens' son) of Boston arrived on Wednesday, the guest of Capt. Gilbert Smith. Capt. Gilbert Smith left on Saturday to attend the funeral of the Rev. D. W. Stevens". The funeral was held in Marlborough and the oration was given by Rev. Augustus Woodbury, a lifelong friend. One of Rev. Stevens last requests was that Rev. Woodbury officiate at his funeral.

The following week the Gazette reported a Memorial Service at the Seamen's Chapel

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with Rev. J. F. Moors of Boston repeating many of Rev. Woodbury's remarks. Mr. Daniel Stevens and Miss Eunice Stevens (his niece) attended this service.

Rev. Woodbury said, "Thus he has lived - an active, useful, honorable life. Thus he has died in peace. His threescore years and ten here have been well spent. He has entered upon the heavenly life to rejoice in the immortal vigor of a pure, faithful, true, and loyal soul." The cause of Unitarianism, the island community, and his congregation were well served during Rev. Stevens time among us.

Rev. Stevens' will stipulated that land be given to the American Unitarian Association with the provision that a chapel be built upon it within the next two years.

This was not done. However, wishing to honor his father's request, his son gave an almost identical piece of land to the Channing District on which to build a chapel. In 1896 this chapel was built by the Channing District on Old Lighthouse Road. We remain very grateful to this remarkable man for whom our chapel is named.

Let us dedicate ourselves to being equally as liberal, welcoming, understanding of other points of view, and of service to others.

Sarah Shepard
April 2011

