

History of the Unitarian-Universalist Church of Canton, NY

The Unitarian-Universalist Church of Canton began as The First Universalist Society in 1825. Of the several small North Country Universalist groups located all the way from Hammond to Malone, it is the only one to survive until today. These groups organized in the 1800s as the St. Lawrence Association of Universalists and met formally once a year.

The charter members of the Canton group originally held church services in the local school under the leadership of a circuit-riding missionary who traveled from New England to bring the message of universal salvation. Canton soon shared ministerial leadership with the Potsdam group and, in 1827, joined with the Baptists to build a church on the site of the current church, a brick meeting house known appropriately as the Union Church.

In 1837 the Universalists bought out the Baptists, and in 1839 were prosperous enough to “call” their first full-time minister, F.J. Briggs (“Brother Briggs”). The Universalists existed as a “society” until 1851 when they organized as a “church.” There is evidence, though, that some supporters continued as members of the society, 50 being listed as such in 1861 with 70 recorded as members of the church! Although renamed the Unitarian Universalist Church of Canton by vote of the congregation following the 1961 merger, officially the church is still the First Universalist Society of Canton.

In 1852 the National Convention of Universalists, meeting in New York, appointed an Education Society to raise funds for the creation of a theological seminary. Two years later, with \$20,000 pledged, they announced that “other things being equal, the place which would do the most for the new institution should receive the preference.” Canton’s Martin Thatcher was on the Education Society and enthusiastically wanted the school to be located in Canton. He recruited three other local men who, along with Canton minister Seth Remington (grandfather of artist Frederic Remington), secured \$21,000 in pledges, earning Canton the site. In 1856, the cornerstone was laid and the institution was chartered by the state of New York as St. Lawrence University and Theological Seminary. The authorization of a college of Letters and Science to share the new building with the Theological School was actually a surprise to many but turned out to be a mutually beneficial union.

The Theological School had a tenuous existence for many years, but its relationship with the Canton church was always a close one. Professors were frequent speakers and both “theologues” and students from the College had roles in the church.

Olympia Brown, who in 1863 was the first woman ordained to ministry in the United States, graduated from the St. Lawrence Theological School. During her years as a student, she taught Sunday school for the Universalist Society in Canton. Years later, in 1920, another woman graduate of the Theological School, Harriet Druley, served actively for a year as “Minister’s assistant” to aging James Payson, before moving on to a full-time ministerial position at the Universalist Church in Henderson, NY.

A third woman, Edna Bruner, the daughter of a Universalist minister, received her B.D. from the St. Lawrence Theological School in 1931. Ordained in Gunnison Memorial Chapel on the St. Lawrence campus, her first church was in Iowa. Ten years later she became General Field Worker for the Universalist Church of America and then in 1945 returned to Canton and parish ministry for five years. Despite being known for her “dynamic nature in the pulpit and unrelenting care in the parish,” not all Canton Universalists were comfortable with a woman in a traditionally male role. Edna Bruner left in 1950 to again become a Field Worker, this time for the Massachusetts and Connecticut Universalist Conventions. Not until 1992 did the Canton church again call a woman to ministry.

However, the women of the congregation had always been significant in the life of the church. In 1862 the original women’s organization was renamed the “Ladies Circle” and was encouraged to “accumulate and manage funds.” The “ladies” raised money for the purchase of the Andrews organ in 1869 (moved from the Brick Church to the new marble church in 1897 and still in use today). In 1891 they paid \$1,800 to purchase the adjacent Governor Wright House for use as a parsonage, and repaired it at an expense of \$1,500. When their indebtedness for these two expenses was paid off, they subscribed \$2,500 to the building of a larger, marble church. Additionally, social events and church programs were initiated by women of the church. Women served equally with men as church trustees for many years, but it was not until 1967 that Church Council elected a woman, Amorette Chrystie, as moderator.

The new church was built at a total cost of \$20,000 and dedicated April 15, 1897. Newspapers referred to it as a stunning addition to the community “in quality, color, impression of elegance and solidity.” Over the years, internal configurations of the church evolved with the changing needs of the congregation as well as to meet the church’s commitment to provide space for community groups.

Needed renovations were made in 1960 to provide religious education space in the basement, to install acoustic tile in the sanctuary ceiling and a tile floor in the vestibule. Contributions to this effort came from Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Calder, Rev. and Mrs. Seth Brooks, and SLU trustee Richard Young, among others..

In 1982, a Restoration Fund drive was launched which raised \$54,000 to stabilize the deteriorating façade of the church. Buttresses were taken down and rebuilt from the ground up. Missing and broken portions of the stone and brick masonry were reconstructed, and loose, crumbling mortar was replaced. Supporting the Fund were 187 members of the church, 67 former members, 241 unaffiliated friends, 11 organizations, 9 Canton businesses, and 33 members of the UU Church of Daytona, FL where Max Coots had been minister on loan two years earlier.

In 1983 the church was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Canton Village Park Historic District. In 1985 the Memorial Garden and Memorial Plaque were dedicated and in 1989, *The World* featured a photo of Canton’s Memorial Garden.

By the mid-1990’s it was clear that more space and some updating was needed to maximize the church’s potential. More than \$400,000 was raised in 1997-98 for renovations and an addition which, when dedicated in September 1999, provided new social room space, a library, a

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religious education office, seven renovated meeting rooms for religious education on the lower level, a music room, upgrades to the original social room, a new air exchange system, and a handicapped-accessible elevator.

Twelve ministers served the marble church from its dedication in 1897 to 1958. Since 1958, though, Canton UUs have had only three settled ministries, Max Coots, 1958-1992, and co-ministers Anne Marsh and Wade Wheelock, 1993-2009, and David Blanchard, 2010-2013.

Under Max Coots' leadership, the church grew in congregational size, programs, and influence in the community. Early in his career Max described his own ministry as being one "of diversity with emphasis on preaching, writing, community service, and personal counseling." During his ministry, he was given an honorary degree by Starr King and a North Country Citation by St. Lawrence University.

Following Max's retirement in 1992, interim minister George Briggs led the congregation through a year of transition while the Search Committee looked for a new settled minister. Anne Marsh and Wade Wheelock, fresh from studies and internships at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago (which followed earlier careers as academics), were the unanimous, enthusiastic choice of the Search Committee and, after a candidating week, the congregation. In their 16 years of ministry, Anne and Wade encouraged and facilitated collaborative ministry, strengthened the religious education program and children's stories, were voices of social conscience in the community, led the congregation to fuller participation in the wider denomination, and put the church on a sound financial footing.

Today, the 220 active members and innumerable friends of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Canton eagerly look forward to the next phase in our congregational life.

Information for this history was extracted by Search Committee member Judy Gibson from archival scrapbooks and several pamphlets written at various times in the past.