



# **A History of the Unitarian-Universalist Church of Savannah**

In the 1820's, a group of wealthy New England businessmen migrated to Savannah to pursue their interest in the cotton trade. The liberals among them found no church to attend, and so formed the Savannah Unitarian Society. In 1831, they petitioned the city and were granted a lot where they could build their church. Sunday morning and evening, laypersons conducted "Divine Services" in a rented building on Court House square. They continued to meet in rented spaces until 1834 when they moved into their first house of worship on Wright Square. The building was dedicated December 21, 1834. Served by a variety of short-term ministers, the congregation sponsored a lyceum and was involved in founding a seaman's benevolent society.

To be religiously liberal in the antebellum south was challenging.

In spite of the difficulties, and under the leadership of the Rev. William Vincent Thatcher, the church met with moderate success until 1839 when a series of gross misapprehensions and uncharitable misstatements in respect to Unitarians led to at least two attempts to set fire to the church. Shortly after this, Thatcher died quite suddenly, and was followed by a series of short-term ministries. The church fell into severe financial troubles.

Struggling along with supply preaching and going deeper into debt as the numbers dwindled, in 1847, "the congregation was forced to sell the Wright Square property to a Baptist congregation for \$65,000. During the Civil War the building burned while being used as a military guardhouse.

For three years, the Unitarian congregation met in Armory Hall until prominent silversmith Moses Eastman, as one of the last acts of his life, offered to build a church and give it to the congregation. Following her husband's death in 1850, Eliza M. Tuthill Eastman fulfilled his wishes and funded completion of the building. The church, facing Oglethorpe Square across from the Owens-Thomas House, was dedicated on November 21, 1851. It was called a "little gem" and "an enduring monument to the generosity of its donors as well as a tasteful ornament to our city." At that time, the building was said to accommodate about 260 persons.

The following May, John Pierpont, Jr., son of a famous Unitarian minister and ardent abolitionist, was called to minister to the congregation for an annual salary of \$1500. Concurrently his ministry in Savannah, in 1857 the song, "One Horse Open Sleigh" was copyrighted, attributed to Pierpont's brother James who served as church music director and organist. For John, at that time, "everything in his church was at a standstill...sermon and lecture listeners remained a tiny, unsubstantial core." By 1859, there was no money to pay Pierpont's salary and he left the ministry to join his brother-in-law in the insurance business.

In August 1859, with no minister, no money and practically no congregation, the Unitarians sold the building to the Episcopal Diocese of Georgia. Since an African-American church on Oglethorpe Square was problematic in those days, the men of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church moved the building to Troup Square. In 1947 the Episcopal Congregation moved to a new building leaving the oak pews. Their building was sold to the Baptists and Unitarianism lay dormant.

After surveying the history in 1970, George H. Gibson concluded, "Unitarianism was too cold, too philosophical and too reasonable to satisfy the emotional needs of the south..."

Sometime in the 1930's, aristocrats and scientists tried, without success, to revive Unitarianism in Savannah. In September 1958, 15 people reestablished and chartered The Savannah Unitarian Church. They met at the YWCA with approximately 8-10 people in attendance. Basil Andrews, traffic manager of Savannah, served as president. Once a month, Harvard-educated Prescott Winterstein spoke to almost 20 people.

It was a close-knit group with a strong commitment to civil rights. While other schools and churches considered closing to keep African Americans out, the Unitarian Church supported integration. The fellowship provided sanctuary for bi-racial groups, tutored students attending Savannah's newly integrated schools and supported the "Save Our Schools" campaign. Church facilities were used for drug counseling and an integrated Girl Scout Troop.

The days of the civil rights struggle of the 1960's brought incidents reminiscent of the abolition controversy of the 1860's. Members were vilified for writing letters to the editor supporting integration. In addition the YWCA, concerned about renting to this liberal group, asked the Unitarians to leave.

With 25 members, the congregation acquired the Francis C. Stone House for \$25 per month. They were without a minister and operating from an inadequate, rat-infested building. But with good and dedicated people and interesting presenters, they survived the tumultuous 1960's. In addition to working for integration, they housed a drug rehab halfway house, coffeehouse and counseling service. At the same time, they continued to renovate Stone House.

In 1961 when the American Unitarian Association merged with the Universalist Church of America, the Savannah Unitarians became Unitarian Universalists. At this time there were 19 members.

In 1962 with 28 members, the congregation initiated a Religious Education (RE) program with about ten students. They field-tested a new RE curriculum and hired young black female high school students to help with the program.

By 1971, the congregation had grown to 44 members and outgrown its space. The congregation bought the Benjamin Sheftall House from Historic Savannah

Foundation. Exchanging rats for pigeons, the congregation erected a Wayside Pulpit, and again repaired and restored a less-than-adequate building, filling the pulpit were a variety of excellent speakers.

In 1974 with 45 members, the congregation applied to the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) for a minister-on-loan, and Frank Anderson was sent to Savannah to serve. Later, under a less formal arrangement, Rev. Anderson became minister “on loan” a second time. In those years, the membership grew from 45 to 50.

When Rev. Anderson retired from New England church, he communicated with members saying he wanted to make a move and start anew. The Board performed a feasibility study with the Thomas Jefferson District to determine if UUCS could support a minister, subsequently calling Rev. Anderson, who served from 1981 to 1989. Membership grew from 50 to 72.

In September 1990, Audrey Vincent was called as the first full-time minister since John Pierpont Jr. Rev. Vincent advanced the Thomas Jefferson District’s program of “Dismantling Racism,” and was involved in the Interracial Interfaith Council. Her presence in the religious affairs of the city altered the church's profile within the community, and the congregation began to become part of the larger religious community.

When the Eastman church again became available, the congregation arranged to buy the present building, and sold the Sheftall House back to Historic Savannah Foundation. According to John Iaderosa, past congregational president, “After years of dialogue with the Savannah Baptist Association, consultation with the UUA, and a campaign that raised over \$170,000, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Savannah returned to its ancestral home. Our first service on Easter Sunday, March 30, 1997, began with a packed house at our Sheftall House sanctuary. After announcements, a hymn and checking in with each other, 170 members and friends walked the five blocks South to our new home.” It required \$83,000 and a great deal of “sweat equity” for repair and renovation.

When Rev. Audrey Vincent retired in 2004, the congregation called Rev. Joan Schneider to Savannah as consulting minister, and 1½ years later as their part-time minister. In February of 2007 Rev. Joan was installed and shortly thereafter the Congregation voted to make her full-time Minister.

During Rev. David H. Messner’s tenure (2012 - 2019) UUCS created and launched WRUU 107.5 FM an independent local radio station, with over

Today the growing congregation delights in their restored sanctuary and renovated social hall, and looks forward to continuing its growth and enthusiasm. We welcome you to join us in creating the next chapter of this history.