

Ferry Beach Heritage Week 2008

Evangelism in Texas (1850-1904)

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AND

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**“Nineteenth-Century Universalist Evangelism: Connecticut to Texas,
A Missionary Success Story”**

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(partial copy here)

Session One: Universalist Evangelism, Connecticut to Texas

PREMISES OF THIS STUDY SESSION

Let us start with a few premises about why we study history in a religious context. For one, history is spiritual practice. That is, knowing the history of those who came before us in these free faith movements of Universalism and Unitarianism enhances our own modern spiritual and religious experiences as Unitarian Universalists.

Furthermore, history informs both the present and the future. Examples of persons, organizations, projects, and other endeavors from the past can not only enlighten us about our current activities in Unitarian Universalism, but also offer illustrations and examples for taking this faith movement into the future. The past offers examples of both what to do and what not to do.

Universalism's premises of **inherent good**, and **all will be saved** formed a welcomed theology in the early 19th-century United States. This new view of faith---that is, the capacity to be religious and but not have to endure messages of endless punishment---must have been revelatory to many people from a wide range of economic and life situations. And to do all this religious practice from the view of reason and intellect, not the revivalist emotionalism that many Universalists were the counter to, added to the appeal of this new American religion.

There were at least two methods of disseminating the gospel of Universalism. One was on a personal level, individual to individual, often preacher to listener, and what we would today call 'lay leader' to initiate, through a range of formal and informal methods. The other was through an institutional approach: the creation of a denominational system not unlike those of most orthodox religions of the time, in congregations, associations, and conventions, populated by declared Universalists working to connect existing Universalists and bring others into the fold through the leadership of preachers and teachers of this meaningful gospel. Ultimately the first succeeded much more effectively than the second did: Universalism's message appealed to many, to such an extent that its principles eventually pervaded other mainstream theologies,

unfortunately making the Universalist denomination per se more expendable. On the other hand, Universalism as a structured system had many shortcomings. The history of Universalism in the United States is the story of a good message in a weak system, including in its missionary and evangelism efforts. Universalist historian Russell Miller frequently describes poor organizational support in the denomination during its first century of existence.

Many for whom Universalism represented very good news acquired a powerful urge to tell others and grow Universalist networks and communities: to bring more and better ministry to those who had already heard about this new message of salvation, and to open up religious horizons for the uninitiated, especially to seek conversion from orthodox religions. Especially during the first half of the nineteenth century, the need for Universalist leadership and system ran ahead of the resources, and Universalists came to realize the need for intentional methods of outreach, growth, and development. How that intentional spreading of the word occurred through mission and outreach is the subject of Universalist Evangelism, an endeavor that today we would refer to as 'outreach' or development.

The aim of this essay and this study session is to offer a study of one missionary effort in the nineteenth century that illustrates both the passion for the theology and the struggles with the system and organization. We will do this by considering **one place—the state of Texas**—whose Universalist history may be a lesser known quantity to many. We will also consider **one missionary effort—the partnership of James and Mary Billings**—and place their Texas missionary work in the context of their larger lives as Universalists. The Billings embodied a life-long passion for this life-saving theology, and accepted many challenges in helping the denomination thrive and grow. Their life work illustrates how dynamic individuals can more-or-less single-bandedly grow a movement, and, sadly, how a movement can fall apart without the inspiration of charismatic leaders. Mary's life also illustrates how northeast Universalists supported evangelism in the west and south: she spent her first sixty years in Connecticut as an active and avid Universalist, and the Connecticut-to-Texas networking is a revealing component of this story of Texas Universalism.

A brief word about my research methods and resulting contributions to our knowledge about Universalist history. Little has been written by other historians about the Billings and about Universalism in Texas. (Indeed, often I hear negative stereotyping, that there could not be a history of liberal religion in a region of the country that is today regarded—incorrectly—as so uniformly conservative in religious outlook.) Thus, I rely on primary sources to the extent possible. I have examined all of the archival records from Texas preserved in the Andover Harvard archives, including the complete records of the Texas Universalist Convention, 1886-1930. I also draw from primary denominational sources, especially the *Universalist Register* (known by various names during the period of my study), the official statistical record of the Universalist denomination. I have also carefully examined several Universalist periodicals of the period: in particular, *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine*, *Gospel Banner*, *Universalist Herald*, *Christian*, (later *Universalist*) *Leader*, *Ladies Repository*, and more.

OVERVIEW OF UNIVERSALIST ORGANIZATION, GROWTH, AND MISSION

Universalist Organization and Growth²

(continued)

¹Russell Miller. *The Larger Hope*, vol. 1. Boston, 1979.

²Miller, *Larger Hope*, ch. 8: "The Prominent Heresy of Our Time," 159-79, is a good overview of growth in Universalism to 1870.