

Unitarian and Universalist Women  
*Liberating History*

*Acknowledgments*

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## Mary Charlotte Ward Granniss Webster Billings

July 11, 1824 - March 2, 1904



Mary Billings was the first woman ordained to Universalist ministry in Texas, in 1892, at the age of 68. Hailing from Connecticut, where she spent the first 60 years of her life, Mary lived her final two decades in Hico, Texas, the mission center of the Universalist movement in the Lone Star State. Her entire life, wherever she lived, Mary was a kind, generous woman, devoted to the cause of serving her Universalist faith.

Mary Charlotte Ward was born in Litchfield, Connecticut, in 1824. The fourteenth of sixteen children, Mary had strong family connections, which informed her view of life and religion. Although the Presbyterian church was the official church of Connecticut after the Revolution, Mary's family were members of the Episcopal church, in which Mary's great-grandfather, Solomon Palmer, was an influential minister in the mid-eighteenth century. Mary was lucky to grow up in Litchfield, which was a center of cultural and industrial prominence.

Because many of Mary's older siblings died young, her parents decided to take her out of formal schooling to "roam free" of institutional constraints. Mary was taught instead by the beautiful countryside of northwestern Connecticut and also by ideas of Universalism that she acquired from an older brother.

Mary married three times. Her first marriage was to silk merchant Frederick Granniss. They lived in Hartford and had a life filled with European travel, a beautiful home, and activities with the Hartford Universalist Church. Unfortunately, Granniss suffered ill health. Mary served as his caretaker through his death in 1866. During this first marriage, she also found time to write and publish extensively: short fictional stories, poems, hymns, a European travel log, and one book. Operating within the domestic spheres proper to women of this period, she expressed her theological views through her writing, as the role of public preacher was not yet open to women. She was a regular contributor to Universalist magazines such as *The Ladies Repository* and the *Lily of the Valley*.

During her second marriage from 1869 to 1877 to Rev. Charles Henry Webster, Mary transitioned toward ministry in the public sphere. She began to appear in pulpits as a lay preacher. Mary was supported by various women's networks, including the Women's Centenary Association and the Women's Ministerial Conference.

After Charles' death in 1877, Mary could well have remained in Connecticut where she was well-connected and well-respected. Instead, in 1885 she moved to Hico, where she married Rev. James Billings, the new Universalist missionary to Texas. In Texas, Mary operated in the public sphere of ministry. She and James worked tirelessly to grow Universalism in a state that was not particularly welcoming to liberal religion. Together they established both the Texas Universalist Convention, personally filling nearly every office in that organization, and they established the Universalist Church of Hico. After James died in 1898, Mary even took over some of his circuit preaching.

On her death in 1904, Mary was celebrated in numerous newspapers and magazines. Her passing was referred to as a "death-knell" for Universalism in Texas. The Texas Convention managed to keep going for another 25 years, but never with the same vigor as during the Billings' period.

*Author: Rev. Barbara Coeyman*

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