

CONNECTICUT TO TEXAS

The Universalist Ministry of
Mary Ward Grannis Webster Billings

Barbara Coley

History matters to me. In 1998 when I started seminary a few years after arriving in Austin, I wanted to learn more about early Unitarians and Universalists in Texas. I had learned that Universalists settled in Texas as early as 1850, so I was surprised that I could find little about Texas in published histories of our religious heritage.

However, in scanning archival materials, the name 'Rev. Mary Billings' kept popping out. Even from the few details I was able to find, I began to feel some resonance with her: we both hailed from the northeast and were transposed to Texas in mid-life, and we were both doing ministry in a region culturally, socially, and geographically removed from what we had grown up with.

Mary succeeded well in Texas: in fact, she was the first woman ordained to Universalist ministry in the state. One difference between us: Mary lived here over a century ago, her ordination occurring in 1892, by the Texas Universalist Convention that she helped organize.

Even though separated by over a hundred years, I felt spiritual kinship from Mary that often kept me going during my own ministerial formation. Knowing she succeeded as a minister here gave me hope that I could too.

During her twenty years here in the Lone Star state, Mary and her new husband, the Reverend James Billings, a Universalist missionary to Texas, did much to spread liberal religion. They established the state Universalist church, All Souls, in the small town of Hico (about fifty miles southwest of Dallas/Fort Worth) and played key

roles in the Texas Universalist Convention. Mary was also a prolific writer and was well networked with women Universalists and writers in Texas and around the country. A kind and generous woman, her entire life Mary was devoted to serving her Universalist faith.

I have been writing the story of Mary's life and ministry. She and countless other nineteenth-century women of liberal faith who have been left out of the historical record can inspire UUs in the early 21st century. Mary faced and overcame many challenges. During the Billings' ministry, Universalism not only survived but thrived here in Texas. Mary had much to teach me as I grew into ministry.

For one, Mary represents the transition from the private to the public sphere made by many women across the nineteenth century. **Mary really was a minister her entire life**, but in the days before it was common for women to occupy the public pulpit or produce theological tracts, Mary expressed herself theologically through her fiction and other writing: short stories, poems, hymns, even travel logs.

Furthermore, researching her life also illustrates the importance of using historical methodology appropriate to women's history. For example, initially I had a hard time finding much about Mary in surviving sources until I realized that, having been married three times, she appears with four different last names in documents recording her life events. Once I had her timeline of name changes straight, her life events began to fall into place.

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Perhaps by joining James Billings in Texas, Mary took advantage of the opportunity to move into public ministry. They married in Waco in 1885 and settled in Hico, then a fledgling cotton town on the westwardly expanding Texas Central Railway. Mary and James made sound real estate investments in Hico on behalf of the church.

They were personally active in All Souls Church in Hico, with the children, women's groups, preaching, and care of the building and parsonage. Together they also occupied most of the offices in the Texas State Convention. Mary was particularly dedicated to the job of corresponding secretary, taking full advantage of the potential of the post office to spread the liberal gospel in a land as large as Texas.

Indeed, there were many challenges in the southwest beyond anything the Billings may have experienced in the north: stark weather, great distances and cumbersome travel, unpredictable agrarian economy, and religious conservatism perhaps as staunch as it is today. In spite of these challenges, congregations grew in numbers and Universalist membership increased during their ministries.

Mary's death in 1904 six years after James died was in fact a death-knell for Texas Universalism, as one writer of an obituary claimed. Universalism hung on in the state for another twenty-five years, but never with the same focus or vigor as during the Billings' years. The final Texas Universalist Convention was held in 1929.

We owe the Billings much. Nearly a hundred years later, Unitarian Universalists in Texas are still enjoying the benefits of the groundwork for liberal religion laid down by Mary and James. Mary certainly inspired my journey to ordination, which I celebrated in early March, 2005. I know that I did not take this journey to ministry alone.

(Barbara Coeyman was recently ordained to Unitarian Universalist ministry. She graduated from Austin Presbyterian Seminary in 2001, completed an intern ministry at First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon, and currently serves as Chaplain of Planned Parenthood of the Texas Capital Region and Consulting Minister of Community Unitarian Universalist Church of San Antonio. Prior to ministry, Dr. Coeyman was professor of music history at West Virginia University.)

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Nedko, tell us about your goals for the future.

My goal for the future is to establish a liberal religious presence in Bulgaria. I sense that translating and publishing some inspiring books, sermons and articles could make a reasonable beginning. Also, I want to increase my personal contacts and friendships with other Unitarian Universalists and progressive religious people, as at times I feel very much alone. What gives me hope and zeal is in knowing the fact that I am not alone in my spiritual and theological journey. I want to share this same hope and zeal with others in my country.

(Vernon Chandler is a Unitarian Universalist minister, a U.S. Army Chaplain and a former editor of the Herald. If you would like to contribute funds toward helping pay Nedko Popov's expenses to attend next year's Universalist Convocation, please e-mail Vernon at the following address: vchandler@yahoo.com or you can write Vernon at P.O. Box 430, Swansea, SC 29160. Vernon is currently exploring means by which donations for Nedko's travel may be tax-deductible.)

Universalism as Mary and James introduced it to Texas was clearly influenced by their experiences as Universalists in the north. James had ministered in New York state and the mid-west, and Mary lived her first sixty years in central Connecticut. That the structure of the Texas Universalist Convention looked a lot like the Connecticut State Convention is not at all surprising. What Mary learned and how she lived the first sixty years of her life as a Universalist in Connecticut had much to do with how she developed this radical religion on the Texas frontier during the final quarter of her life.

Mary Ward was born in Litchfield, Connecticut, in 1824, the fourteenth of sixteen children. The fourth largest town in Connecticut during Mary's youth with a population around 4000, Litchfield was located in one of the most culturally rich areas in the state.

The country's first law school, Tapping Reeve, opened in 1784 and the Litchfield Female Academy opened in 1792. Girls were nurtured well in Litchfield. After several older siblings died young, Mary was pulled from school to learn on her own through reading great literature and being allowed to 'roam free' in the beautiful countryside around Litchfield. Helping to care for her large family, Mary also learned caregiving as a way of life.

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, the Reverend Solomon Palmer, was an influential minister in the mid-eighteenth century. Sometime around 1830 Mary and an older brother (probably Henry) were converted to Universalist ideas by the Reverend Menzies Rayner, minister at Hartford's Universalist church. There being no Universalist congregation in Litchfield, the Wards practiced their new faith privately.

Mary's first marriage, in 1845, was to a wealthy silk merchant, Frederick Granniss, also of

Litchfield. They moved to Hartford and there were active members of the Hartford Universalist congregation. The couple lived comfortably. Having no children, Mary had much time for writing.

Her first book, *Emma Clermont*, appeared in 1849; the Universalist periodical *Ladies Repository* published her travel log of the Granniss' extended tour of Europe, 1859-60; and her hymns appeared in many sources. Although Mary's life as Granniss' wife was situated in the domestic sphere typical for women at mid-century, she also developed strong ties to other women Universalists such as Caroline Soule. Mary's domestic responsibilities were re-enforced by the need to care for her ailing husband, who died in 1866.

In 1869 Mary married again, this time a Universalist minister, the Reverend Charles Henry Webster, state missionary in Connecticut. They lived in Rocky Hill, a village south of Hartford. During this marriage as a minister's wife, Mary expanded her connections with other Universalists, especially women ministers. She preached her first sermon as a lay-minister in 1873 in the pulpit of Phoebe Hanaford's church in New Haven. Mary was active in the Women's Centenary Association and the Women's Ministerial Conference started by Julia Ward Howe, and in the 1880s her biography was included in E. R. Hanson's *Our Women's Workers*, and eleven of her hymns were published in *Women in Sacred Song*. Her husband died in 1877.

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