



Detail of Caleb Butler's Map of Groton, MA
1828-1829

Note location of Butler's house

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OPEN DOOR SUNDAY

NOVEMBER 1, 2009



First Parish Church of Groton
Unitarian Universalist

*Celebrating our Foundation
as a Unitarian Congregation in 1826*



June Johnson:

Caleb Butler

Like June herself, Caleb Butler was a lawyer and was also very involved in Town concerns. Caleb Butler served as Headmaster at Lawrence Academy, Postmaster, Selectman, and as a Deacon of First Parish. He was also a surveyor and gardener and produced early maps of the Town of Groton.



Rocky Sandy:

Rev. Dr. Daniel Chaplin

Rev. Chaplin was Groton's minister for 48 years. He was the minister when the steeple was struck by lightning and caught fire. In his early days as minister in Groton, a group of dissatisfied church members seceded from First Parish and established a Presbyterian church in Groton. As minister, he married 555 couples!



Annie Rayhill:

Lucinda Bennett

As a teenager, Lucinda (nee Nutting?) attended First Parish Church with her father. In 1857, Mrs. Bennett dictated her memories of the events related to the split to her son. Steve Burne transcribed her memories for us to read today.

In Gratitude

Many people contributed to the arrival of this day! Many and heart-felt thanks to Jeff Close (sound); Shawn McCann (music); Terri Ragot (costuming); Bob Lotz (photography); Rev. Elea Kemler & Brenna Mayer (worship planning); Religious Education Committee & Liz Davis-Chaffin (children's alternative activity); Dave Kimpton & Teen Alternatives Youth (set crew); Susan Parks (administrative support); Gail & Steve Burne and Roger & Donna Allen (Fellowship Hour Hosts); Steve Burne (church history & archives); Fran O'Donnell (Manuscripts and Archives, Andover-Harvard Theological Library); Richard Rogers & Midori Harris (playwriting advice). Special thanks to the Endowment Board for financial support of this endeavor. Thanks, of course, to the cast of readers, and to the support and interest of the congregation!

Special thank you to Rev. Elea Kemler for her enthusiasm for and faith in this undertaking. This dramatic reading would not have happened without the expert contributions and collegial support of Leslie Coates, who has my eternal gratitude. And all thanks, as always, to David Webb, who listened, supported, and encouraged through it all.

In the end I believe that our story, while not one of perfect behavior at all times, is one we can claim and be inspired by. In this story I see a direct link from our foundation to the present. While the specific issues have changed, our forbears believed it was a person's character and deeds that made them a person of faith, that complete agreement on matters of belief was not a requirement for religious fellowship, and that it is important to keep our pulpit as well as our hearts and minds open to a range of truths and understandings. As our founders said as they covenanted with one another in 1826: "We will endeavor to be faithful to each other; to be helpers of each other's spiritual joy, promoters of each other's spiritual welfare, striving together to walk worthy of our high vocations."

Much of the dialogue in the reading comes directly from the written records of the period. John Todd's biography provided plenty of color (more than I could fit into the reading!). The Ecclesiastical Council, Caleb Butler's response to the Council's report, and the Old Church Records were all sources of material. Lucinda Bennett's dictation to her son also provided several colorful stories. I have also taken creative license by imagining dialogue, in particular between the Dicksons, Jr. and Sr., and have made small revisions to original language when it seemed necessary. The original Covenant and Henry Ware Jr.'s address to the congregation have been edited for length.



Jenny Clark:

Walter Dickson Jr.

Walter Dickson Jr. was a farmer until he left Groton to work as a missionary in Palestine. His house at Jaffa was attacked and he was severely wounded. Jenny's mother, Marge Kimpton, is reading the part of Walter Jr.'s father, Walter Dickson Sr.



Marge Kimpton:

Walter Dickson Sr.

Walter Dickson Sr. was one of the original 26 members of First Parish under a Unitarian minister. Walter Dickson Sr. was John Steinbeck's great-great-great-great-great-grandfather! Marge Kimpton is Jenny Clark's (Walter Dickson, Jr.) mother!



Rev. George Downey:

Rev. Henry Ware Jr.

Rev. Henry Ware Jr. was one of the leaders in the founding of the American Unitarian Association in 1825. He was known for a combination of personal warmth and pulpit eloquence. He was Professor of Pulpit Eloquence and Pastoral Care at Harvard and mentored Ralph Waldo Emerson.



George Capalbo:

John Todd

Mr. Todd was a 25-year old recent graduate of Andover Seminary when he was invited to preach at First Parish in Groton. He became the first minister installed at the newly formed Union Congregational church.



Melinda Green:

Writer/Liturgist

Melinda has written a lot of poetry, but this dramatic reading is a first. She is currently enrolled in the Master of Divinity program at Andover Newton Theological school and is preparing for Unitarian Universalist ministry. Henry Ware Jr. was her paternal great-grandmother's great-uncle.



Leslie Coates:

Director

Leslie received the MFA in Musical Theatre from San Diego State and the BFA in Theater from Emporia State University. He was the founding artistic director of the Gamaliel Theatre Company and currently brings small-cast and solo theatrical presentations based in the Christian liturgical calendar to churches. Leslie is also a student at Andover Newton Theological School.

Notes about this Reading

by Melinda Green

In the spring of 2009, I needed to research and write a final paper/project for a class at Andover Newton Theological School. I had been haunted by the unflattering story of how First Parish became Unitarian. The story went that Unitarian opponents of the Orthodox ministerial candidate, John Todd, had perhaps set a small shed on fire nearby and while a number of Todd supporters were gone fighting the fire, the Unitarians locked the meetinghouse doors and took the vote on Todd. I decided to explore how I might address that painful part of our past through worship. Once I began researching the history, however, I discovered an entirely different story – the one told here today. None of the documents written at the time of the controversy about calling Mr. Todd make any mention of a fire during the Town Meeting where Mr. Todd's call was under consideration. Not even John Todd's fascinating biography, based on his own letters and stories, makes any mention of a fire, and he seemed to have no problem accusing the Unitarians of all sorts of heinous deeds! The Ecclesiastical Council, formed solely of Orthodox supporters, makes no mention of a fire either; and they, too, would have had cause to mention any "voting irregularities" (real or perceived) at that meeting.