

Early Scholarly History

In 1839, James Silk Buckingham, an English world traveler, left New York for a journey through the southern states of the United States. His first stop was in Charleston, and from there he traveled to Columbia. The resulting book, *The Slave States of America*, contains a detailed, and apparently, very accurate description of the two cities. Of Columbia he says, among many other observations,

“There are six churches in Columbia, the Episcopal, the Methodist, the Baptist, the **Unitarian**, and the Roman Catholic, neither of which are remarkable for size or beauty.”

Unfortunately, we have no other record of that early church, and we know it was not recognized by the American Unitarian Association which had been established in 1825. We can speculate that it may have been founded by Thomas Cooper. Cooper was a protégé of Joseph Priestley and we know he was a Unitarian and an early professor of law and chemistry at the new South Carolina College. Soon thereafter he became President of the College and the main library at the University is named for him. More research is needed.

There are also references to early Universalist churches in Columbia. Last spring Peggy Rawheiser, who has written a well reviewed book on Universalist history, in a post to the UU History chat line said:

Dr. Daniel Bragg Clayton who was one of the most beloved preachers at the Universalist churches in North Carolina lived in Columbia, SC. He surely had some Universalist activity in his home town. In 1895, Universalist Dr. Quillen Shinn reported that he had preached in Columbia SC.

In a reply, Steven Rowe, a Universalist who lives somewhere in South Carolina, said:

Right, there were two Universalist Churches in Columbia (one held meetings where Main Street Methodist Church is now) - that one was the 1896 Church. I think the other was 1880s. Athalia Irwin was one of folks who attended the 1896 church see the UUHS of last year or so; and Carrie Timmons was a Sunday school teacher. (Clayton was living in Chesterfield County in-between Columbia churches....)

The formal file on the UUFC in the archives of the Unitarian Universalist Association first mentions an inquiry from a Louis Parnet of Columbia in March 1920. Parnet wanted to know how to start a Unitarian church. Other early milestones include:

- In May 1920, Dr. Lindsay Peters, an obstetrician on Gervais Street gathered 12 - 15 people to attend a Unitarian service by Mr. C.M. Gray of Charleston.
- By November of that year, Dr. Peters had withdrawn from the efforts to start a Unitarian Church saying the “sympathy with Unitarianism” was hurting his practice.
- In a letter to the American Unitarian Association, C.M. Gray said, “We have a fight on our hands if we make a dent, even, in the bigotry and indifference of South Carolina.”

- During the 1930s and '40s a number of other individuals made numerous attempts to establish a Unitarian Church here. One of the most active was Charlotte (Mrs. H.H.) Hickman.
- After World War II ended, the efforts became more organized. In 1949, communication was established between a group of Columbia Unitarians and Monroe Husbands, the AUA director of church extension. Under Husbands, the "Fellowship Movement" flourished. At that time a fellowship was a small, lay-led congregation that received little support or guidance from the AUA. Also in 1949, Rev. Dale DeWitt, Regional Director of the American Unitarian Association came to Columbia to help get a new church established.
- Mr. Glen Cannon of Devine Street, another key player in Columbia, was given responsibility for establishing a fellowship.
- After an 18 month effort, the Rev. Lon Roy Call, Minister-at-Large for church extension, conducted an organizational meeting and on April 30, 1950, the Unitarian Fellowship of Columbia was approved by the American Unitarian Association.

The 18 original members were: L.H. Seay, President, Glenn A. Cannon, Secretary, Kenneth E. Bray, Treasurer, Mrs. Kenneth Bray, Mrs. R.I. Hull, Miss Elinor Hull, Mr. Homer B. Mark (?) Mrs. Homer B. Mark (?) Mr. W.S. Spaulding, Mrs. W.S. Spaulding, Miss Jane McPherson, Mrs. F.F. McPherson, Mrs. R.S. Woodbridge, Augustus M. Sutcliffe, Robert Vaudin, J. Bussy Albea, Mrs. H.H. (Charlotte) Hickman, Roy C. Derby.