

A HISTORY OF THE  
FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH  
OF  
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

1830-2005



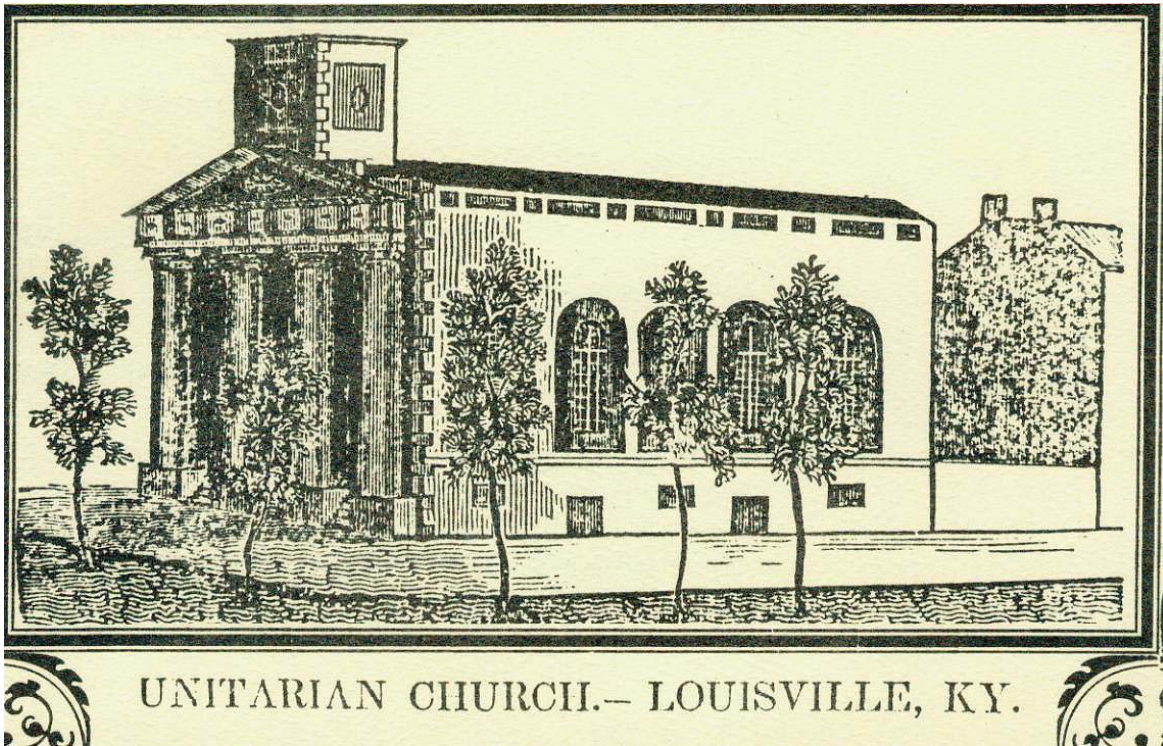
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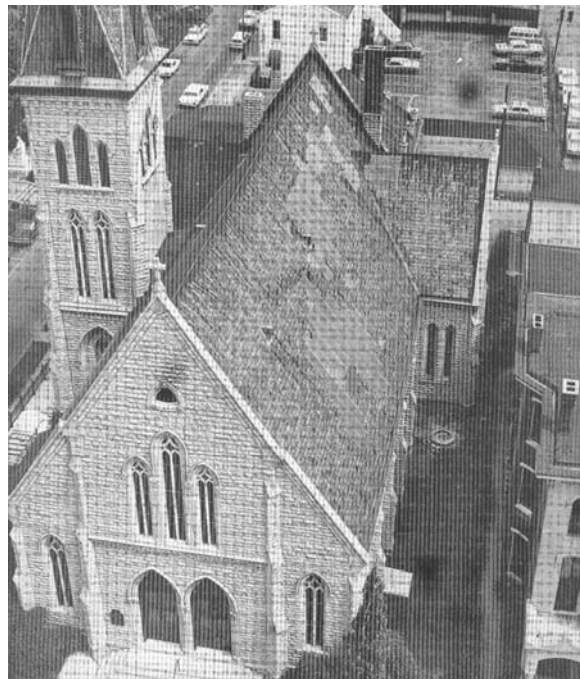
## INTRODUCTION

This history of our church was a part of our 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration and builds on earlier histories prepared for the centennial of the church in 1930, the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary (1955), the centennial of the church building (1971) and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary (1980). It is based on the First Unitarian Church papers at the Filson Historical Society, the archives at the church, files of *The Western Messenger* in Cincinnati, and numerous interviews with past and present church members, files of the periodical *The Western Messenger* (1833-1841), and Unitarian and Universalist general histories.

We are grateful to Richard Beal, Barbra Donnelly, Robert French, Gordon Gibson, Anne Miller, Bob Reed, Carol Tobe, Ann Ulinski, Dick Weston, and Susan Wilburn for sharing their time and wisdom with us. We also want to thank the staffs of the Filson Historical Society and the Louisville Free Public Library, and Tom Owen of the University of Louisville archives for their assistance in helping us find resource materials for this history. Finally, our thanks go to Delbert Hillegas and his students in the print shop at Prosser School of Technology for their fine work in printing this book.



The First Unitarian Church, Fifth and Walnut, 1832-1871



The First Unitarian Church, Fourth and York, 1871-1985

## **A HISTORY OF THE FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH**

### **1830-2005**

#### **Chapter 1: Beginnings in Boston and Louisville**

Founded in 1830, the First Unitarian Church of Louisville, Kentucky, is almost as old as organized Unitarianism in the United States. In fact, the founding of the Louisville church was a direct result of the organization of the American Unitarian Association (AUA) in 1825. The primary motive for the formation of the AUA was the enthusiasm of young Harvard-educated ministers to extend Unitarianism into the American West. In 1825, the “West” was Louisville. The missionaries’ success in establishing a church in Louisville gave shape to the AUA, even as the AUA missionaries gave shape to the Louisville church.

The organization of Unitarianism as a denomination in the United States was by no means a foregone conclusion. Throughout the late 1700s and early 1800s ministers of the liberal Congregationalist churches in Massachusetts resisted the label “Unitarian.” After William Ellery Channing embraced the term and defined its characteristics in 1819, it was six more years before Boston-area ministers formed an association to promote Unitarian ideas and to develop and support new Unitarian churches. Opposition to forming an association was both socio-political and theological. Most Unitarian churches of 1825 had developed as “standing order” churches under the laws of Massachusetts. This meant that each congregationalist church was the church that was mandated to be both the town meeting hall and the tax-supported place of worship as each village in Massachusetts was settled. Many Congregationalist ministers saw no need to reach beyond the government approved and tax-supported churches to back the formation of other churches. Massachusetts did not formally dissociate Congregationalist churches from government support until 1833.

Opposition to forming a denomination was more than just social, however. Many liberal ministers who were willing to accept the Unitarian label argued against a denominational or missionary effort on theological grounds. The liberals, who favored a practical Christianity that did not argue doctrines but focused on right living, feared that competition in the marketplace of Protestant Christian ideas would reduce Unitarianism to being one Christian sect among many. They did not want to fragment the energy of pure and practical Christianity in doctrinal arguments that they saw as being deeply divisive and divorced from the practical religion of Jesus. Their word for denominational competition was sectarianism. Sectarianism was denounced as antithetical to the peace and unity of the church and as a waste of Christian time and energy. Congregationalists especially did not want to see “pure and practical” Christianity placed in competition with emotional and uneducated expressions of Christianity that they deemed to be irrational.

Tipping the balance in favor of organizing an association to promote Unitarian ideas were the expansion of the country to the West and the belief among Unitarian ministers that duty called them to offer educated believers the option of a rational Christianity. The concern of these young ministers for a rational Christianity echoed the teaching of their Harvard Divinity School professor, Andrews Norton, and was reflected in the writings of Dr. Joseph Priestly as early as 1794: “I find nothing but the extremes of infidelity and bigoted orthodoxy....” The missionary effort of the newly developed AUA in 1825 was to provide a middle way for people who rejected orthodox or evangelical Christianity and thus were falling into infidelity because there was no rational church for them to attend. The missionary intent and national scope of the association is clear in the Rev. Henry Ware, Jr.’s proposal for its establishment. Rev. Ware proposed that Unitarian ministers form:

...a new organization...the chief and ultimate object [of which] will be the promotion of pure and undefiled religion by disseminating the knowledge of it where adequate means of religious instruction are not now enjoyed. Its operations will extend themselves throughout the whole country [and] will chiefly consist of the publication and distribution of tracts and the support of missionaries. (Quoted in Lyttle, *Freedom Moves West: A History of the Western Unitarian Conference, 1852-1952* (1952), p. 21)

New developments in transportation channeled the Association's missionary efforts along two pathways: by canal boat along the Erie Canal, where a church was founded at Rochester, New York, in 1829, and by steamboat down the Ohio River, where churches were formed at Cincinnati and Louisville in 1830 and at St. Louis in 1835.

After its May 1825 founding, the AUA's first "run" at the West was to send theology student Moses G. Thomas on a five-month mission of inquiry through 12 states. Thomas reported back to the AUA in the fall of 1826, identifying Cincinnati and Louisville as among the cities where he thought Unitarian preachers would be most helpful to the cause of religion. Of Louisville, Thomas reported finding a "...number of literary men who entertain liberal views of religion [but] at present seldom attend any church." The interest ascribed to "literary men" was typical of the appeal that Unitarianism held for those who desired to advance intellectual culture. Benefits of developing a Unitarian cultural milieu included establishing high standards of sermonic thought and literary production, as well as promoting non-sectarian public school systems, Lyceum lectures, public libraries, and evening classes for working people.

In 1829, the Rev. John Pierpont, another Unitarian missionary, preached in both Cincinnati and Louisville. The Louisville meetings were held in the school room of Francis E. Goddard, a former New Englander, on Green Street (now Liberty Street) between Fourth and Fifth Streets. Pierpont's report to the AUA made these observations:

Society in the Western country is marked by strong features.... They are direct and prompt in their intellectual movements. They are further distinguished by intellectual

activity and energy. Freedom of religious inquiry is encouraged. *They* will examine and understand and appreciate our faith! (Quoted in Lyttle, *Freedom Moves West*, p. 27)

Pierpont's efforts and eloquence on behalf of Unitarianism led to the founding of the Cincinnati church on January 21, 1830. The Rev. Bernard Whitman of Waltham, Massachusetts came to Cincinnati in May for the dedication of the new church building, and then headed downriver to Louisville to make calls on men who had been inspired by John Pierpont the previous autumn.

Bernard Whitman was a radical among the young, liberal Unitarians who had founded the AUA. At his home congregation in the textile town of Waltham, he had befriended the young women who worked in the textile mills, advocating more humane working conditions and organizing study groups. He also became close friends with Restorationist Universalists in Waltham. This was a radical association for that time, when many Unitarians considered Universalists to be among the dissenting sects who were creating divisiveness in Christendom. Universalist historians report that Universalists in Louisville in 1830 decided to contribute to the founding of the Unitarian Church rather than to organize and finance another liberal church in Louisville on their own. Bernard Whitman was one of the few Unitarians of his day who would have encouraged this Unitarian/Universalist collaboration in the cause of liberal religion. Unfortunately, the Louisville Unitarians later refused the Universalists permission to meet in the church, dealing the Universalist movement in Louisville a ten-year setback.

Whitman toiled in Louisville through June 1830, meeting with potential backers for the Unitarian Church. He gave the notice on July 2, 1830, that there would be a meeting at Mr. Goddard's School the next day at 3 pm of subscribers interested in building a Unitarian Church.

The "literary men" who responded to Whitman's invitation to make a home for rational faith in Louisville included educators Francis E. Goddard and Mann Butler, lawyers and judges

S.S. Nichols and Henry Pirtle, an editor, Fortunatus Cosby, Jr., and businessmen S.S. Goodwin and George Meriwether. The July 3 meeting resulted in this resolution:

On motion made and seconded it was unanimously RESOLVED, That the persons here present with their associates will form themselves into a Society, to be denominated the First Unitarian Society of Louisville. RESOLVED, That Simeon L. Goodwin, Edmund H. Lewis, Perley Chamberlin, Dr. I. Middleton, Archibald Allan, Frederick A. Kaye, Elisha Applegate, George W. Meriwether and John B. Bland be the General Committee of this Society to organize the Association, to receive and collect subscriptions, to procure a lot of land, and as soon as practicable to erect a Church, and do all things necessary to carry into effect the designs of the Society. The said Committee to have the right to draw up rules to govern their proceedings, to do all acts by a major vote, and fill up all vacancies in their own body.

On motion adjourned.

Geo. W. Meriwether,

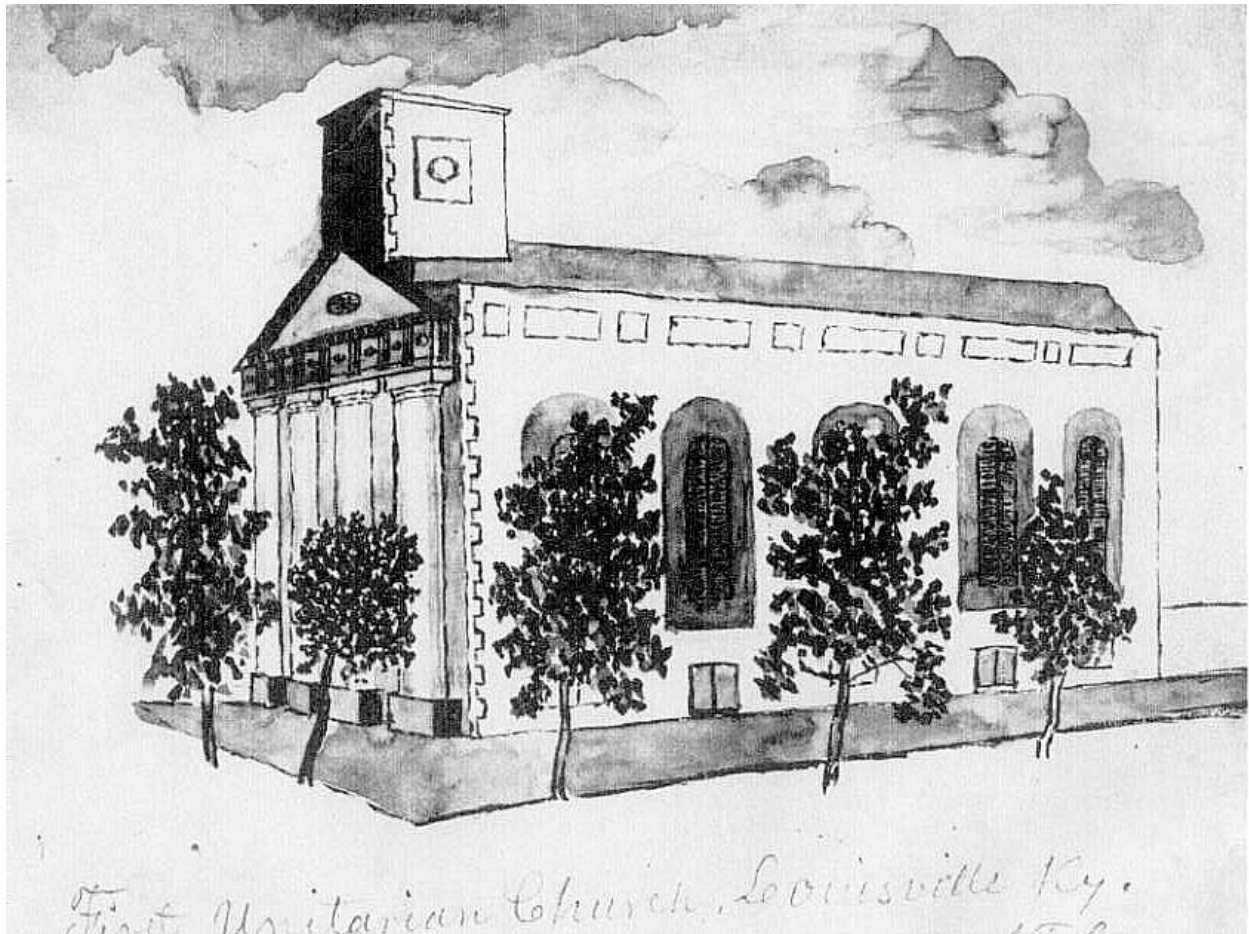
F.E. Goddard, Secretary

The Unitarian identity that the new Louisville society claimed was shared at that time by 120 Unitarian churches in eastern Massachusetts, nine in Maine, ten in the other New England States, three in Pennsylvania, and one each in New York City, Baltimore, Washington DC, Charleston, South Carolina, Rochester, New York, and Cincinnati. The Louisville church was only the third Unitarian congregation to form in a slave state (after Baltimore and Charleston) and the first congregation in slave territory to be recruited by the new American Unitarian Association.

In 1830, Louisville was a town of approximately 10,000 people. The 1832 Louisville City Directory lists only six churches, one each for the Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Catholics, and Unitarians.

Within the first month of its deliberations the General Committee of the First Unitarian Society of Louisville commissioned Francis E. Goddard to go to the eastern states “to solicit pecuniary aid in building a Unitarian Church.” Goddard reported back with funds raised in the

East in October 1830, although there is no record of the amount of money he raised. Both local and eastern financing paid for the construction of the first church building. By 1832 the society had built a handsome Greek Revival building and hired a minister. The society now called itself the “First Unitarian Church.”



The new building, shown above in a sketch by James Freeman Clarke, was located at the corner of Fifth and Walnut Street (now Muhammad Ali Boulevard) where the Kentucky Towers apartment building now stands. The city directory of 1832 gives a detailed description of the grandeur of this building. While to date no photographs of the exterior of this building have been discovered, the Church does possess a copy of an 1839 drawing of the church done by its then minister James Freeman Clarke.

James Freeman Clarke’s writings and the church meeting minutes give clues to the appearance of the interior of the building. In his autobiography, Clarke noted that “One day I noticed a gentleman whom I had not seen there before, whose arm hung over the pew-door, holding in his hand a riding-whip....” Clarke’s noting that the pews had doors, and the description of the location of the pews in the church minutes, supported the theory that the interior of the church repeated the pattern of boxed pews common to the congregational churches of New England. These boxed pews were for sale as the primary source of funds for the church’s construction and endowment. There were 64 pews for sale on the main floor with 10 free pews for visitors and non-owners in a U-shaped upper gallery. The 64 pews on the first floor were divided by two side aisles with two pew boxes adjoining one another in the center section:

	Aisle			Aisle	

It is likely that the Church repeated the New England pattern of a raised pulpit reached by a set of steps so that the people could see the minister above the walls of the pews.

The cost of joining the church by buying a pew was \$100, \$125, or \$150 depending on the pew’s location. In 2006 dollars, this translates into an investment in the church of from \$2,100 to \$3,250. Unsold pews could be rented for 10 percent of the purchase price per year. Visitors who were not invited into a pew owner’s box for a service were welcome to sit in the gallery. Pew owners were subject to pew taxes voted on by the Trustees when extra income was necessary for repairs to the building. The minister’s salary was not paid from the sale or rental

of pews but by voluntary subscription. Only pew owners, who could be male or female, could vote on the election of the five trustees who were the church's decision makers. Pew owners, renters, and church musicians were eligible to vote on the choice of a minister.

With subscribers found and the new church constructed, the proud new building was ready for dedication on May 27, 1832. Consistent with the involvement and support of Boston Unitarians in organizing the church, two outstanding Boston preachers came to preside at the dedication. The Rev. Francis Parkman preached the sermon, and the Rev. James Walker, who would later become president of Harvard University, read the scriptures. The text for the dedication sermon was John 4:23: "But the hour cometh and now is when the true worshipers

shall worship the Father in Spirit and in truth, for the Father seeketh such to worship Him."



GEORGE CHAPMAN  
Born 1809—Died 1834  
As he appeared when he graduated from  
the Harvard Divinity School in 1831.

Walker stayed to supply the church for the first two Sundays in June 1832. The Rev. Ephraim Peabody, newly installed as the Cinnati minister, preached on June 17. Then on June 24, the first called pastor of the First Unitarian Church, the Rev. George Chapman, preached his initial sermon on the text Luke 6:46: "And why call you me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" Consistent with the Unitarian emphasis on a Christianity of ethical living, rather than salvation from sin, the first minister's first sermon

was on doing.

The Rev. George Chapman was 22 years old when he graduated from Harvard in 1831 and 23 when he became the church's first minister. His pastorate lasted only one year. Little is

known about his work in Louisville except that the trustees were pleased with it. When he resigned the trustees wrote a letter urging him to stay, fearing they would never find anyone as qualified as Chapman to promote liberal Christianity and minimize sectarian feelings.

Chapman's reply expressed his regret that he could not stay longer in Louisville, but neither his letter nor the trustees' alludes to his health, which was surely a significant cause for his resignation. He returned to his New England home where he died of tuberculosis in 1834.

The trustees appealed to the Church's mentor in Waltham, the Rev. Bernard Whitman, to recruit for them another Harvard-educated minister. Whitman's choice, James Freeman Clarke, graduated from Harvard in 1833. He preached the first sermon of his career in Whitman's church, then immediately departed for his assignment in Louisville. Whitman's service as mentor to the Louisville church ended in 1834, when he, too, died of tuberculosis.