

The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta

By Jim Kelley

The Beginning

The origin the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta began in the post-Civil War years when two ministers, Unitarian George Leonard Chaney and Universalist Quillen Hamilton Shinn came to Atlanta to establish the first churches of their denominations in the city. It is thanks to the work of these two pioneers plus the effort and dedication of many who followed them that we have the congregation that we have now.

In early 1882 Unitarian minister George Leonard Chaney, a wealthy upper class “Boston Brahmin” stepped off a train in downtown Atlanta, sent by the American Unitarian Association to explore the possibility of establishing a Unitarian church in the city. There was only one family of Unitarians in living in Atlanta, and according to Rev. Chaney, of the three family members, “two of them were unable to listen to preaching because of deafness.” His job was not made easier by the common southern perception that Unitarianism was a Yankee,” religion closely tied to the anti-slavery movement. Of the half dozen southern Unitarian Churches that existed prior to the Civil War, only two, Charleston, South Carolina and New Orleans, Louisiana, survived the war.¹

Despite this lingering perception, Chaney was welcomed by Atlanta’s business leaders who were eager to reestablish business ties with the north, and both Chaney and his wife Caroline became prominent members of Atlanta society. Rev. Chaney persevered, and with “a lot of patience . . . added to Faith,” the Church of Our Father was chartered on April 24, 1884, at the corner of North Forsyth and Church streets.² However, the church was unable to grow as attracting new members proved to be difficult for this liberal northern religion. The church was continually stressed for money and was dependent on the AUA for financial support.

(For more on Chaney see <https://uudb.org/articles/georgeleonardchaney.html>.)

The Universalists attempted to start a church in Atlanta in 1879, but the first successful attempt began in 1893 when Universalist missionary Rev. Quillen Hamilton Shinn came to Atlanta. Unlike the Harvard educated Chaney, Shinn was born on a farm in West Virginia. Thanks to the work of Shinn and other circuit riding ministers, numerous small Universalist Meeting Houses were established in small towns and villages in the rural south. Although the Universalist National Convention had condemned slavery years before the Unitarians took similar action, their rural southern presence allowed Universalists to avoid the “Abolitionist” brand. On July 15, 1900, The First Universalist Church of Atlanta was dedicated at 16 East Harris Street.³

(For more on Shinn see <https://uudb.org/articles/quillenhamiltonshinn.html>. For more on Universalism in the south, see Appendix A.)

In 1899 the Atlanta Unitarians sold their property to the Carnegie Library Trustees for the construction of a public library. Of the \$20,500 selling price, only \$500 went to the local church and the balance went to the coffers of the AUA who held the title to the property. The AUA did agree to build a new church building in Atlanta, which was dedicated in January, 1900. Four years later, the congregation put Unitarian in their name for the first time when they changed it from the “Church of Our Father” to the “First Unitarian Church of Atlanta.” The second location at Spring and Forsyth Streets proved to be a poor choice and the building, which had been poorly constructed, required constant repairs that put further financial strain on the struggling



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congregation. In 1915 they moved to a third location at 301 (later 669) West Peachtree Street. Rev. Chaney and his wife Caroline returned for the dedication of the new building. The stained glass windows in the front of the church were dedicated to Reverend and Mrs. Chaney, who had been an integral part of her husband’s ministry.⁴

The Rocky Merger

Compared to their Universalist neighbors, the Universalists had a healthy membership and were financially stable. Growing weary of constantly needing to fund the weak Atlanta church, the American Unitarian Association urged the local Unitarians to merge

with the Universalists but the Unitarians resisted. Finally as the U.S. became involved in WW I, the two churches agreed to a temporary union to conserve coal for the war effort. The merger, intended to be for the duration of the war, was eventually made permanent.⁵

It was, however, a rocky marriage as the class differences between the urban, northern Unitarians and the rural, southern Universalists created conflict, and the two groups never effectively coalesced into a single united body. At the same time, the combined church suffered from a series of short-term ministers, many of whom were ill-suited to serve such a fractured congregation. One such minister was Unitarian Earnest Bowden who served from 1923 to 1925. In a letter to the Unitarian's Boston office, he wrote that "it grits our people [Unitarians] badly to see a man [Universalist] chewing a quid of tobacco all through the service or to see another rise from his seat and spit out the window."⁶ Tellingly, Rev. Bowden referred to Unitarians as "our people" as if his Universalist parishioners were part of another congregation.

While the men were spitting tobacco and creating animosity, the women began to work together. Both Unitarian and Universalist women had been working together for the Woman's Suffrage movement, and soon after the merger, the Universalist Women's Mission Circle and the Unitarian Woman's Alliance began having joint meetings. By 1919 they had united to form a single Woman's Union.⁷ (For more on Atlanta Unitarian and Universalist involvement in the Woman's Suffrage Movement, see Appendix A.)

Controversy and Dissolution

In the years following World War II renewed efforts to gain civil rights for African Americans threatened the Southern Jim Crow tradition, while at the same time the country entered the period known as the "Red Scare" with its McCarthy era anti-communist witch hunts. Despite being religious liberals, many in the congregation maintained their southern racism and were afraid of being labeled "Communists."

Fissures in the Atlanta Church reached a boiling point when Atlanta University professor and African American Unitarian from Ohio, Dr. Thomas B. Jones, attended a Sunday service in November 1947. The minister, New England born Rev. Isaiah Domas,

was much more politically liberal than his parishioners, many of whom had already grown concerned about his political activity. Previously, Ralph McGill, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* had criticized Domas' left-wing activities and wrote that the church had been targeted for "infiltration" by the Communist Party.⁸

According to Domas' account, Dr. Jones "was seated without incident, even to the taking of his offering," but following the service the phones lines began ringing. Rev. Domas supported Dr. Jones' right to attend the church, which led to a no confidence vote that forced Rev. Domas to resign. After his departure the church splintered, and both the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America withdrew their support from their dysfunctional Atlanta congregation. In 1951 the American Unitarian Association, which held the title to the property, sold the West Peachtree building and the church was officially dissolved.⁹

(For more on the church dissolution see appendix B.)

Rebirth

Fortunately, the dissolution of the church was not the end of the story. Supported by both the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America, Rev. Glenn O. Canfield arrived in Atlanta in late 1951 to reestablish a new Unitarian Universalist church with the expressed goal of creating an integrated congregation. The United Liberal Church originally held services in the Briarcliff Hotel, but the hotel manager would not allow African American children to ride the elevator to the rooms being used for religious education classes.¹⁰

Motivated to find a home of their own, the church reached an agreement with a Mormon congregation to share their property at the corner of Boulevard and North Avenue until the Mormons completed construction of their new facility on Ponce De Leon Avenue. The Mormons held services in the morning, while the Unitarian Universalist conducted theirs in the afternoon. The partnership worked well, but to respect Mormon beliefs, the Unitarian Universalists had to forgo their traditional coffee hour after services. In April 1954, the United Liberal Church bought the property and finally had a home to call their own. The new church bylaws declared that membership was open to anyone regardless

of “race, color, nationality or station in life,” and it became Atlanta’s first integrated church. Whitney Young Jr., Dean of Social Work at Atlanta University and future leader of the National Urban League, was an early African American member.¹¹

The church was growing, so the members decided to move and began a search for a new location. The Atlanta City Council denied them permission to use its first choice because of its integrated membership. In January 1966, the members moved into their sixth church home at 1911 Cliff Valley Way in nearby DeKalb County.¹²

(For more on the move to Cliff Valley see Appendix C.)

In 1961 the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America merged, and the Atlanta church, which had predated the national merger by 43 rather rocky years, became a member of the newly formed Unitarian Universalist Association. With the move to Cliff Valley Way the church was renamed the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta (UUCA). Church membership grew to over a thousand, and in 1968 the Northwest Unitarian Universalist Congregation was spun off to accommodate the increased membership. The Cliff Valley Way building was our church home for 52 years until March 2018 when the congregation voted to sell the property to Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta. The next four years the Unitarian Universalists were without a permanent home – a situation further complicated by the Corona Virus Pandemic, which forced them hold services virtually. Finally the “nomadic” congregation moved into their seventh “permanent” home at 2650 North Druid Hills Road, Atlanta in the September of 2022.¹³

Appendix A: Southern Universalism.

Universalism came to the south before the Civil War as the German “Dunkers,” who were often misnamed the Pennsylvania Dutch, migrated south into the Carolinas, Georgia, and other southern states. The Dunker’s were a mystic sect who had, among other tenets, a belief in Universal Salvation. As they moved south, the Dunkers established churches in small rural towns. Although many of these churches failed in the disruption of the Civil War, they did provide a southern presence upon which Universalist circuit riding ministers and evangelists like Rev. Shinn were able to rebuild southern Universalism.¹⁴

When Rev. Shinn came to Atlanta, his trip was sponsored by the Universalist Young People’s Christian Union (YPCU). YPCU was not a youth group as we think of one today. It was a missionary organization that worked to new establish Universalist congregations and one of their major efforts was to build a church in Atlanta. For a denomination that mainly consisted of small churches in rural towns, establishing a church in a major urban center like Atlanta was a major accomplishment. To commemorate this important milestone, the Young Peoples Christian Union held their convention in Atlanta in July 1900 where they also dedicated their new building at 16 East Harris Street.¹⁵

Appendix B: The Woman’s suffrage Movement in Atlanta.

After the first convention for women’s rights in 1848, the Women’s Suffrage Movement remained a contentious issue for the next three quarters of a century. It is not known how the men of the churches felt on the issue, but both the Atlanta Unitarian and Universalist churches became centers for the struggle for women’s right to vote. Monthly meetings of the Atlanta Equal Suffrage Association were held at the Unitarian Church, and in 1894 Unitarian Mrs. F. C. Swift was president. In 1895 the National American Woman Suffrage Association held their national convention in Atlanta - their first convention held outside of Washington D.C. By holding the convention in the south, the movement sought to broaden the support for their cause, especially in the South. In both 1901 and 1902 the state conventions of the Georgia Women’s Suffrage Association were held at the Universalist Church on Harris Street. In addition to advocating for the right for women to vote, they supported child labor reform and urged

“the just principle of equal pay for equal work.”¹⁶ Women finally gained the right to vote on August 26, 1922, when the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified. Work on “the just principle of equal pay for equal work” is ongoing.

Appendix C: The Founders Window.

The stained glass “Founder’s Window” that was dedicated to Rev. and Caroline Chaney in 1915 was almost lost to eternity. In 1951, when the American Unitarian Association sold the building, it was first used by a Baptist Church and later it became the Abbey Restaurant, a church-themed restaurant where the waiters dressed as Monks. In 1974 the Northwest UU church held the installation dinner for their new minister, Rev. Bob Karnan who recognized the significance of the window. In 1977 the building was scheduled for demolition to make way for a Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) station and office complex. Thanks to Rev. Karnan, the widows were saved and put on indefinite loan to the Northwest UU Church.¹⁷

Today the top portion of the “Founder’s Window” that was dedicated to Rev. and Caroline Chaney is at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta and the bottom portion is located at our sister congregation, the Northwest Unitarian Universalist Church in nearby Sandy Springs.

Appendix D: The Church Dissolution.

When the Atlanta church refused to allow Dr. Jones to attend services, the Unitarian Ministers Association responded by urging their members to boycott calls to the Atlanta congregation. The Universalists took a different view. They were concerned about Rev. Domas’ political activities and were fearful of being branded as a Communist front organization. The Universalists submitted names of four possible ministers to the Atlanta Congregation, but none were chosen.

Instead of seeking either a Unitarian or a Universalist to fill their pulpit, the remaining church members called Earle LeBaron, an ex-Catholic priest who left the Catholic fold because of a long a history of sexual affairs with female parishioners. He was also an arch-segregationist and rabid anti-Communist red baiter, who claimed to have a heroic war record and a PhD from the University of Rome – both of which were total fabrications. LeBaron, who must have been a smooth talker, used his falsified resume to secure a teaching position at nearby Georgia Technical Institute. He served the church until the summer of 1950, and by 1952 he had been terminated by Georgia Tech. Before he left town, he was arrested for assaulting a woman at gunpoint, but managed to have the charges dropped a few weeks later. LeBaron was bitter about leaving Atlanta and blamed his dismissals from both Georgia Tech and the Atlanta Unitarian Universalist Church on a “Communist-Catholic conspiracy . . . [that] joined forces to drive me from Georgia Tech and the Atlanta Church.”¹⁸

With the departure of LeBaron, the church called Baptist Joseph A. Rabun to as acting minister. Rev. Rabun was the opposite of LeBaron. He had been a U.S Navy Chaplain who served with the Marines in the Pacific during World War II and was an outspoken supporter of civil rights. In 1946 he led a successful effort to get the Georgia Baptist Convention to condemn racial hatred. While serving the McRae Baptist Church in South Georgia, his racial views caused conflict with powerful congregant, arch-segregationist and leading Georgia politician, Herman Talmadge. Rabun lost his pulpit, which made him available to fill the Atlanta Unitarian Universalist pulpit. Some members of the church continued to meet with Rev. Rabun in the Cox-Carlton Hotel until 1954.¹⁹

Appendix E: The Move to Cliff Valley.

The 1960’s were a time of social upheaval and massive white flight from the inner cities to the suburbs. While the United Liberal Church was integrated, the neighborhood around their church was changing. In addition to the poor condition and the inadequate size of their building, the changing demographics and the “white flight” from Atlanta no doubt played a role their decision to move.

Appendix F: The Cliff Valley Building.

The Cliff Valley building featured a distinctive round sanctuary with stadium style seating that allowed the members to see each other as well as the minister. As rev. Capitalize Rev. Eugene Pickett wrote, the round sanctuary symbolized the “basic search for truth” and was an “inclusive symbol in which the minister becomes a member of the congregation.” The building’s distinctive design received an “Honor Award” from the National Association of Church Architecture and an “Award of Merit” from the American Society for Church Architecture.²⁰

¹ Rev. George L. Chaney, "Review of Southern Expansion" in *The Christian Register*, Vol. 94, No. 20 (May 18, 1916), 11-13 (467-469), (Found in [Christian Register - Google Books](#)).

² Rev. George L. Chaney, "Review of Southern Expansion" in *The Christian Register*, Vol. 94, No. 20 (May 18, 1916), 11-13 (467-469), (Found in [Christian Register - Google Books](#)).

³ Earl Wallace Cory, "Unitarians and Universalists of the Southeastern United States During the 19th Century, (Unpublished Dissertation, University of Georgia, 1970), <https://nwuuc.org/archive/unitarians-and-universalists-of-the-southeastern-united-states-during-the-19th-century-by-earl-wallace-cory-1970/>; Charles A. Howe, "Quillen Shinn," (Unitarian Universalist Dictionary of Biographies, Jan. 28, 2006), <https://uudb.org/articles/quillenhamiltonshinn.html>; "Shinn, Quillen Hamilton," *Harvard Square*, <https://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/biographies/quillen-hamilton-shinn/>.

⁴ "Unitarian Church Dedicated Sunday," *Atlanta Constitution*, Monday November 8, 1915, 7; "Services of Dedication of the New House of Worship," (Atlanta, Ga., November 7, 1919), (Order of service for Dedication of new church in author's possession).

⁵ "The Unitarian Church," *Atlanta Constitution*, February 23, 1918, 6; Healthy Merger in Atlanta," *The Christian Register*, (April 17, 1919), Vol. 98, No. 16, 21; "Two Churches Combine," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 6, 1918, 6.

⁶ Bowden, Ernest. "Rev. Bowden Letter to Dr. Eliot" (June 29, 1925), [Eliot, Samuel A. \(Samuel Atkins\), 1862-1950. American Unitarian Association Presidential Papers - bMS 496, Series: Individual Correspondence, Box: 2, File: Bowden, Rev. Ernest J., Atlanta, Georgia \(Folder #1\). Boston, MA: Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University, Series: Individual Correspondence, Box: 2, File: Bowden, Rev. Ernest J., Atlanta, Georgia \(Folder #1\). Boston, MA: Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University; Fredric W. Perkins, "Report of the Atlanta Church," \(April 3, 1940\), Unitarian Universalist Congregational Resource Files, bMS 902/Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University; Robert Cummings, "Report on Atlanta Church," February, 3, 1950, \(in author's possession\).](#)

⁷ *Atlanta Constitution*, March 24, 1918, 11, June 21, 1918, 4, November 10, 1918; Meeting Minutes of The Woman's Union, (February 10, 1919), Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta Records, RG 026, Archives and Manuscripts Dept., Pitts Theology Library, Emory University, Atlanta GA.

⁸ Ralph McGill "The Unitarians Have Reason to Fret," *Atlanta Constitution*, (August 13, 1948), 14; Peggy Beard, interview in "The Phoenix Rises: Rebirth of Unitarian Universalism in Atlanta," 2004, Produced, Written and Edited by Mria and Michael Dangerfield, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPQNhmRXgJs>

⁹ Domas, Isaiah Jonathan. "Letter to Congregation" (April 21, 1948) [textual record]. [Unitarian Universalist Association. Minister files, 1825-2010 - bMS 1446, Series: Subseries D, Box: 48, File: Domas, Isaiah J. \(2 folders\). Boston, MA: Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University.](#)

¹⁰ Short Bio of Rev. Glenn O. Canfield, <https://nwuuc.org/archive/category/minister/canfield/>; "First Service Set For New Church," *Atlanta Constitution*, February 22, 1952, 11; "Unitarian Universalist," (Church Notices), *Atlanta Constitution*, February 7, 1953, 14; *Atlanta Constitution*, March 8, 1952, 6,

(move to larger space); "A New Liberal Church for Atlanta," (Advertisement), February 22, 1952, 2; Peggy Beard, interview in "The Phoenix Rises: Rebirth of Unitarian Universalism in Atlanta," 2004, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPQNhmRXgJs>; Rev. Glenn Canfield quoted in "The Phoenix Rises," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPQNhmRXgJs>.

¹¹ *Atlanta Constitution*, January 23, 1954, 12; "United Liberal Church buys 2 Buildings," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 26, 1954, 22; "In our Churches," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 22, 1954, 8; "The Phoenix Rises," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPQNhmRXgJs>

¹² "Aldermen Deny Beer Permit, Reject Church Zoning Permit," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 21, 1962, 9. (In 1994, Alderman Buddy Fowlkes was convicted of bribery charges, Douglas Blackman, "Fowlkes Guilty on 4 Counts" *Atlanta Constitution*, August 23, 1994, 1.); "Unitarians Dedicate New Church Sunday," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 22, 1965.

¹³ Dan Holums, in *The Phoenix Rising*," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPQNhmRXgJs>.

¹⁴ Jay Kiskel, "In the Beginning: Origins of Universalism in South Carolina, 1780-1900," *The Journal of Unitarian Universalist History*, Vol. XLII, 32-64.

¹⁵ *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 10, 1990, 5.

¹⁶ "Equal Suffrage Advocates," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 28, 1895, 7; "Women Suffragists Hold Annual Election," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 30, 1902, 9.

¹⁷ Billie Cheney Speed, "Church Windows Survive MARTA," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 6, 1979, 25.

¹⁸ "Earle LeBaron to Attorney-General Eugene Cook, State of Georgia," (April 8, 1956), LeBaron Family Papers, quoted in Brooks, "The Hit Dog Howls;" "Ex-Professor Sought Here in Beating," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 8, 1952; "Ex-Professor Freed from Attack Charge," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 22, 1952.

¹⁹ Sam Clarke, "News about Georgia," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 11, 1947, 18; "Ousted Georgia Pastor May Run for Governor," *Huntsville (Ala.) Times*, August 14, 1947, 1; "Accomplished Orator Rabun in Uphill Fight," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 25, 1948, 16; Ralph McGill, "Two Hokes and Joe Rabun," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 1, 1948, 10.

²⁰ "Church-in-the-Round to be built in DeKalb," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 9, 1965, 6; "New Unitarian-Universalist Church Here Includes Unique Stadium-Style Sanctuary," December 27, 1965, 6; "Unitarian Dedicate New Church Sunday," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 22, 1966, 6; "Architects Give 2 Awards to Atlanta Church," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 29, 1965, 6; Rev. Eugene Pickett, in a brochure describing the new building to visitors, (on file).