

“Pillars and Windows”

Great works of art are often anonymous. The names of the masons and craftsmen who erected the magnificent cathedrals of the Middle Ages remain unknown to history. But it's more surprising that controversy would still revolve over who designed and built the meetinghouse that stands at the top of Church Street in Burlington, where our Unitarian forbears began to worship in 1816.

This much is agreed upon. Our congregation prior to that point held services in the local courthouse. But in spring of 1815, a meeting took place in Barnard's Tavern—where presumably malt beverages were available to lift the spirits—and there a vote was taken to purchase five acres of overgrown pasture known as Lot 17 to the north of Pearl Street as the site for a future church, that those present "may be enabled to worship Almighty God conformably to the dictates of their consciences, and in a manner suitable to the religion they profess."

A collection was soon taken, to which there were 57 subscribers, pledging \$11,585. A second subscription brought in 14 more contributors and raised the total by another thousand dollars, but not nearly enough for the project in mind. Then with the aid of three very generous donors—E.T. Englesby, Horace Loomis, and John Pomeroy--another ten thousand came in, enough to actually hire an architect and begin to build.

It was a bold step, for Burlington was not the largest municipality in the state at that time, but still a relatively primitive outpost, with a population numbering just about two thousand women, children and men. The lot where the meetinghouse now sits was forested, with a gully or ravine running to the west. Headlines from the *Northern Sentinel*, the town's newspaper, remind us that it was a different era. President Madison was asking Congress for power to enforce the Neutrality Act. In Danville, an indentured servant, aged fifteen, was on the loose, his master promising to pay "one cent reward" for his swift return. From London—"all reports about the escape of Bonaparte are unfounded." A local apothecary advertises "anti-bilious pills" while travelers are informed that the trip from Washington to Quebec can now be made in less than seven days—with a degree of ease unequalled anywhere in the world.

But despite such signs of progress, Vermonters were suffering. A letter dated from mid-summer complained, "Night before last ... beans, cucumbers and squashes were killed." That was the summer it frosted in July, in fact frosted every month of the year in the Green Mountain State. Mount Tambora had erupted in far off Indonesia, the biggest volcanic explosion in recorded history, darkening the atmosphere with dust and altering weather patterns world wide. Drought added to the cold. Belts were tightening. But our ancestors, instead of flinching or faltering, forged ahead, erecting this structure from cornerstone to spire in less than seven months.

In his address to the congregation a century ago, on the hundredth anniversary of our founding, our minister the Reverend Charles Staples commented, "Ever since coming to this town and becoming acquainted with this building I have been amazed at this expenditure. Where, I ask, did the money come from? It certainly did not come from outside sources; it was not borrowed and the bill left for others to settle. This undertaking was entered upon immediately after a burdensome war [the War of 1812], alternately disastrous and unsuccessful, which must in this region have at least

unsettled values most alarmingly. There had been much loss of property, ill to be spared in a frontier town, and many out of work. All enterprises, commercial and educational, were abandoned. The value of currency was perhaps double what it is now. The site on which are now gathered was almost wild, covered with a scrub of locust and pine, the streets were hardly discernible, the houses were widely scattered, few standing as yet between the upper town at the head of Pearl Street and the lower along the lake. Make these facts vivid to your imagination and you will realize that these men went deeper into their pockets than any of you generous folk have ever done. There is only one conclusion, the builders of what I delight to think they called their 'Brick Meeting House' believed in their religion and its importance."

He goes on to relate how the timbers were hewn in the nearby Brown's River valley, "four mighty beams for the roof, 66 feet long, 14 inches by 14," sixty thousand shingles, over half a million bricks, the nails hammered out by hand. But who actually conceived this marvelous edifice?

"It has been for many years something of a mystery to whom we were indebted for the design of this church building," Staples confides. "That mystery has been lifted but at the same time depend by the discovery of receipts from two Boston architects of the period, both for 'plans and drawings for a meeting house in Burling' and dated within two days, one June 28, 1815, the other June 30. The latter is given by Charles Bullfinch," already renowned as architect of the Boston State House and soon to become even more famous as the architect of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., and is for the sum of fifty dollars. Many of Bullfinch's drawings were destroyed when he decamped from New England to the District of Columbia, so unfortunately we have no record of whatever structure he envisioned for the First Unitarian Society. The other receipt, for half Bullfinch's fee, is from Peter Banner, another prominent designer who a few years earlier had planned the Park Street Church on Boston's Common and was also responsible for the President's House and Lyceum at Yale College. Contracts for the finished work specify the structure be completed "according to the plan drawn by Mr. Banner," suggesting that the younger man was the lead architect, but that his plans may have been reviewed or amended by his older, more experienced colleague.

Neither signed his name on the lower corner of the canvas. So perhaps we'll never know with one hundred percent certainty who deserves full recognition, and perhaps it doesn't matter, anymore than it matters that we remember the names of all hundred-odd congregants who signed the original Articles of Association that formed our Society back in 1810. Who were John Collins and Amos Lawrence and Gideon Lathrop? Just names, with no biographies. Those founding members, known and unknown, are like the pillars of this sanctuary, fashioned in such a plain style and so well-proportioned to their task that they don't call attention to themselves, but patiently and unobtrusively bear the weight of passing years. They're like the windows of this sanctuary, filled with large, clear, transparent panes, that enable us to see more clearly and bring illumination precisely because they make themselves invisible. They are like the stone foundations of this building, which do their job and support the brickwork of tower and steeple only because they themselves are buried deep and sleep quietly under the earth. They're like the doors, which perform their work properly only when they swing away from our gaze to help us enter the wider congregation they guard and shelter.

Whoever they were, our forbears, we know that they were not building for themselves but for their posterity, mindful not just of their own needs but of the needs of generations to come. They were building not so much a shrine for private devotion as a temple for public enlightenment.

Both Bullfinch and Peter Banner, after all, were known for public buildings: for legislative chambers, for schools, and also for churches, which were considered institutions for the inculcation of civic virtue as much as colleges or state capitols. Both men were practitioners of an architectural style known as Federalism, which blossomed in the early days of the American experiment in conscious imitation of classical models, Greek democracy and Roman republicanism, that were inspirations to the nation's founders in their own quest for self-government.

Buildings like this one, therefore, were intended as reflections of a revolutionary, egalitarian spirit. They were spatial embodiments of people's aspirations for a life governed by symmetry and balance, of a yearning for liberty in the context of mutual responsibility. The scale of this building meant that it was intended not just for Sunday worship, but for town wide events, a gathering place in times of crisis and celebration. It was built to be a free church for a free people.

And so it remains. Although the members of our congregation legally "own" this building through their elected Board, it would be more accurate to say that the members—all of you, all of us—hold it together in trust, for the public good. So that when America elected its first African American president last November there was a meetinghouse in Burlington where blacks and whites could come together to reflect and rejoice in that historic milestone. So that when George Tiller, who provided abortion services to women in Kansas, was shot and killed while attending his own Lutheran congregation last spring, there was a meetinghouse in Burlington ready to open its doors where people could express their grief and outrage at the crime. This meetinghouse is a place where you can hear out-of-the-mainstream opinions from journalists like Amy Goodman and Jeremy Scahill, and where you'll hear views expressed from the pulpit that would cost any other minister his or her job. It is what its designers intended it to be: a building accessible to all offering citizens of varied viewpoints the spiritual resources they need for informed self-rule. Its very architecture expresses a New England heritage that includes religious tolerance, respect for learning, and a feisty tendency to question authority.

But freedom, of course, is not free. Just as the construction of this sanctuary required a sacrificial investment from those who built it, its ongoing maintenance and preservation require something of us. As we approach our Society's bicentennial, therefore, your elected leaders have launched a planned giving campaign to insure the same legacy that was bequeathed to us remains available to our children and grandchildren. Each of us is encouraged to remember this Society in our financial planning, so that the values that have been important to us in this world can reliably endure not just throughout our own lifetime but also beyond.

Personally, if I'm fortunate enough to die with assets to my name, I hope to pass on a good portion of my material wealth to my children, after caring for my wife, to guarantee their well-being. My will is written that way, as perhaps it should be. But as a parent, I

also know that the most important things I've given to my children aren't things at all, but lessons in character and self-reliance, with a respect for their own worth and the worth of other people that are at the heart of our liberal faith.

As I see my offspring developing into mature, thoughtful, and socially-engaged young adults, friends with those of other nationalities and races, eager for knowledge, critical of vested interests, I know that Unitarian Universalism has made a difference in their growth, as it's made a difference for me and for so many others. And I feel that I owe some debt, have an obligation, to make sure that this tradition survives and thrives, to be there into our third century and beyond.

This meetinghouse of ours was built to last. It will be still be here in the year 2110, standing at the top of Church Street, I'm almost sure it will. But how will our successors, a hundred hence, remember us? Probably not at all as individuals, or by name. We will be anonymous, most of us, forgotten whether our ashes lie in the garden nearby or are scattered to winds. Time will have moved on. But whether we are recalled or not, our legacy will be felt by those who come after. We will be known, either as a generous, charitable and farsighted people who grasped the challenges and opportunities of their historic moment, or as a generation who shrugged and turned aside when "tomorrow" beacons them onward.

For myself, I don't imagine that I'll have mustered much lasting fame, or that reputation will be important to me then. My little ego will be long since vanished. But if I can remain as a pillar or window, unseen and unnoticed, but offering light and support to those who follow, my life will have mattered. For my part, let me be a doorway, for others to enter, or a foundation, where they can build.