

# Our History

Tracing our Congregation  
from 1729 to Today



ARLINGTON  
STREET CHURCH  
Unitarian Universalist

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## BEGINNINGS

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- Our community began as a group of Scots-Irish Calvinists gathered in a converted barn on Long Lane in Boston on November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1729. The inhospitable residents of Boston dubbed them derogatorily as “The Church of the Presbyterian Strangers,” and the name stuck. The building became known as the Long Lane Meeting House.
- A real church was built on the site in 1744; in it, the Massachusetts State Convention met and ratified the Constitution of the United States on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1788. When the street name was changed from Long Lane to Federal Street in honor of the event, the building became known as The Federal Street Church
- In 1787, the congregation, wanting to be self-governing, voted to call Jeremy Belknap, a liberal Congregationalist, to lead them in adopting the congregational form of governance. Thus they left the required creed and rule of the Presbytery.
- William Ellery Channing, often known as the Father of American Unitarianism, served as Senior Minister at the Federal Street Church from 1803 to 1842. Under his leadership the congregation prospered. To accommodate the crowds that Channing drew, the third meeting house, designed by the noted Charles Bulfinch, was built in 1809 on the Federal Street site.
- In 1819 Channing delivered “The Baltimore Sermon,” which defined the new Unitarian theology for the burgeoning Unitarian movement. Although Channing originally resisted formation of a new denomination, under the direction of his associate and later successor, Ezra Stiles Gannett, the move toward separation from the Congregationalists began. The American Unitarian Association (AUA) was formed in the vestry of the Federal Street Church on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1825, with Channing offering well wishes and Ezra Stiles Gannett serving as Secretary.
- Through brilliant preaching, writing, and publishing, Channing made many contributions to the moral thought of his day, none more important than his clearly reasoned though highly delayed statement against *Slavery*, which became a national best seller, even as it alienated some of his wealthy parishioners who opposed abolition.

- In 1903, on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his installation as minister, a statue of William Ellery Channing was placed across from Arlington Street Church on the edge of the Public Garden.

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## THE PRESENT CHURCH BUILDING

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As the population of Boston grew and land became scarce, landfills were created in the North End, South End, and finally the Back Bay during the 1850s. When the area around Federal Street became commercial, the congregation adventurously voted to move to the Back Bay. Arlington Street Church was the first public building to be constructed on the newly filled land.

- The present building was begun in 1859 and dedicated in 1861. Designed by Arthur Gilman, architect for the Old Boston City Hall, its exterior was inspired by St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London.
- The building is supported by 999 wooden pilings driven into the mud of Back Bay. Brownstone for the exterior was quarried in New Jersey.
- The steeple stands 190 feet tall and contains a set of 16 bells, each with a Biblical inscription. It is one of only four sets in the city of Boston still rung by hand.

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## THE CHURCH INTERIOR

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The sanctuary, with its beautiful Corinthian columns and graceful rounded arches, was modeled after the great basilica of the Church of the Annunziata in Genoa, Italy. The panels on either side of the choir loft, containing the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, were brought from the Federal Street Church, as was Dr. Channing's pulpit, which stands in the Hunnewell Chapel. The box pews, made of chestnut with black walnut rails, were at one time deeded to members of the congregation. Enclosing each pew signified that they were privately owned and kept drafts from blowing in from the aisles.

Originally, all of the sanctuary windows contained clear glass. In 1898 the congregation voted to install memorial stained glass windows created by the studios of Louis C. Tiffany. The last of the 16 windows was installed in 1930. The church archives contain designs for the four windows that were never installed, because the Tiffany Studios was liquidated in 1937 and thereafter new Tiffany windows were unobtainable.

The Aeolian Skinner organ was installed in 1957.

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## GOVERNANCE AND ASSOCIATION

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Arlington Street Church is the spiritual home of a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association, a denomination created in 1961 by the consolidation of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America.

The denomination is organized on the basis of congregational church government. Each congregation is self-governing, deciding on its form of worship, professional and lay leadership, programs, and business. Congregations are members of the Unitarian Universalist Association and are united by a statement of Purposes and Principles. Each congregation elects delegates to a yearly General Assembly where they democratically vote on matters of denominational importance and on resolutions of social witness. Congregations are served by programs provided by the Association at the continental and regional levels.

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## UNITARIANISM

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In the late 1700s, liberal and conservative wings emerged in the Congregational churches of New England, the liberals affirming the Unity of God and the conservatives affirming the Trinity. Additionally, the movement reacted against Calvinistic doctrines that emphasized human sinfulness and the predestination of some souls to heaven and some to hell. Unitarians (and Universalists) argued that such doctrines were inconsistent with the concept of a loving God, were unbiblical, and contrary to reason. After 1805 the dispute between liberals (Unitarians) and conservatives (Congregationalists) became so bitter that many churches divided, and organized separate religious bodies. It was Channing at Federal Street Church who most powerfully championed and defined the new Unitarianism. The term Unitarian referred to the belief in one God, as opposed to God in three persons.

Nineteenth-century transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson had a lasting effect on Unitarianism, especially in making it more receptive to religious ideas drawn from personal experiences and non-Biblical sources. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the variety of liberal religious beliefs has broadened greatly to include those who prize the Jewish and Christian traditions, those who affirm the impact of science on their humanistic faith, persons with an earth-centered spiritual orientation, and many more. Indeed, many would hold

that the nature of humanness makes it natural for persons to hold a vast diversity of beliefs and still unite to worship and find inspiration for their own lives and to serve causes of justice and peace.

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## UNIVERSALISM

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In 1770, Universalism came to America from England with John Murray. Rev. Murray founded the First Universalist Church of Gloucester, Massachusetts in 1779, and spread the word throughout the northeast by horseback. In 1785, he helped to found the first Universalist organization. In 1805, Hosea Ballou, the foremost Universalist theologian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, defined a more heretical gospel that had much in common with Unitarian thought. Ballou rejected the Trinity and the predestinarian belief in God's punishment of even the innocent. Ballou held that a loving God forgave human sin, and thus there would be universal salvation.

Early Universalist preachers, believing that they were called by God, were mainly self-taught or mentored by Ballou and others. They established churches through circuit riding, debated the orthodox on courthouse steps, and attracted large numbers of common people to the new faith. By 1850, ministerial education had become a priority and the Universalists began founding their own theological schools. Where Unitarianism appealed to the educated and socially elite, Universalism touched the hearts of a broad cross-section of common people. Both movements spoke to issues of slavery and peace and acted to help those in need.

By 1900 Universalism was the sixth largest US denomination but declined as its message came to seem less unique. Yet, Universalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was informed by many of the same cultural, biblical, and scientific advances as Unitarianism, and the two denominations grew more alike, making possible the merger of 1961.

Closing the circle, the church of Hosea Ballou, the Second Universalist Church of Boston, merged its assets with Arlington Street Church in 1967. In so doing, Arlington Street Church inherited the thinking of two great liberal theologians, the Unitarian Channing and the Universalist Ballou.

For more information about Unitarian Universalism, visit the Unitarian Universalist Association's home on the world wide web: <http://www.uua.org/>.



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