

First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia records

01

**Finding aid prepared by Sarah Leu and Anastasia Matijkiw
through the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's Hidden
Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories.**

Last updated on September 22, 2016.

First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia Archives

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Summary Information

Repository	First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia Archives
Creator	First Unitarian Church (Philadelphia, Pa.)
Title	First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia records
Call number	01
Date	1796-circa 2000s
Extent	70 linear feet
Language	English
Abstract	<p>The First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia is a Unitarian Universalist congregation located in Center City, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It is the longest continually functioning Unitarian church in the United States. The Church was first formed as the Society of Unitarian Christians of Philadelphia in 1796. In 1825, Reverend William Henry Furness (1801-1896) became the Society's first regularly ordained, full-time minister and led the Church for fifty years. As of 2015, the church continues to operate in a building designed for them in 1885 by noted architect Frank Furness (1839-1912), one of the sons of William Henry Furness. The First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia records, 1796-circa 2000s, consist of administrative and financial records, church registers, correspondence, history materials, and other materials related to the Church, as well as papers of the Church's first minister, William Henry Furness, and other individuals associated or involved with the Church such as Joseph Priestley, John Vaughn, Anders Lunde, Ella Wister Haines, and others. Photographs, audio and video materials, scrapbooks, and newspaper clippings are also included in the collection.</p>

Biography/History

The First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia is a Unitarian Universalist congregation located in Center City, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It is the longest continually functioning Unitarian church in the United States. The Church does not have an official creed but upholds several shared principles that support the "free and responsible search for truth and meaning." The Unitarian Church is welcoming of all members of various religions including Christianity, Buddhism, Humanism, Judaism, Atheism, Paganism, and other traditions.

The First Unitarian Church was initially formed as the Society of Unitarian Christians of Philadelphia in 1796 by twenty Philadelphians directed and encouraged by Unitarian minister Joseph Priestley (1722-1804). Priestley, best known as the father of modern chemistry for his discovery of oxygen, had fled England to Pennsylvania after persecution by the Church of England. The Society sought the help of Priestley as a church leader, but he instead encouraged the Society to organize under lay leadership. The Society was subsequently led by lay members until 1825.

The Unitarians were considered unorthodox, as they required no creed of religion of their members. Many members of the Society were merchants and respectable members of society. Members abstained from politics, and were generally accepted by the community.

The Society was first given space by the University of Pennsylvania in one of its buildings located at Fourth and Arch Streets. This arrangement lasted until 1799. The Society continued to meet in the area, including a handful of meetings held in Carpenters' Hall in 1807. In 1813, the Unitarians opened their first church building located on the northeast corner of Tenth and Locust Streets. The building, octagonal in shape, was designed by Robert Mills.

In 1825, Reverend William Henry Furness (1801-1896) became the Society's first regularly ordained, full-time minister. Originally from Boston and a graduate of Harvard College and Theological Department, he served as pastor for fifty years and then pastor emeritus until his death in 1896. Under Furness, the Society's membership quickly increased. A new church structure was completed in 1828 to accommodate the growing numbers of the membership. Built by William Strickland, the new structure had a seating capacity of 800.

Furness became active in the anti-slavery movement in 1839. His abolitionist ministry work alienated some members of the Church. Although some members left the church, others were drawn to Furness' antislavery crusade. Following the Union victory in the American Civil War, Furness became a civic affairs leader. Furness retired as minister in 1875, and was succeeded by Reverend Joseph May. The Church relocated westward in 1885 to Chestnut Street between Twenty-first and Twenty-second street. The building was designed one of Reverend Furness' sons, the well-known architect Frank Furness (1839-1912).

As of 2015, the Church continues to operate in the building located on Chestnut Street, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1971. The building also serves as a regional community center sponsoring educational, civic, wellness, and spiritual events. The Church has been led by a series of settled, interim, and associate ministers, including the Rev. Victor H. Carpenter, who served the

congregation from 1968 to 1976 and received the denomination's award for distinguished lifetime service in 2011. Notable members of the church include African-American writer and feminist activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, portrait painter Thomas Sully, abolitionist Laura Matilde Towne, Congressman William Darrah Kelly, civic reformer Henry Charles Lea, actress Fanny Kemble, and actor Kevin Bacon.

A history of Unitarianism in Philadelphia, *Philadelphia Unitarianism, 1796-1861*, was compiled by Dr. Elizabeth M. Geffen (1913-2002) in 1961. Geffen, a member of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, received her B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in American Civilizations and taught at Lebanon Valley College in Annville, Pennsylvania. Her research included the history of religion in general and of Philadelphia in particular.

Bibliography:

Quote text from: First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. "Our Beliefs." Accessed December 22, 2015. <http://www.philauu.org/beliefs>.

First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. "Our Legacy." Accessed December 22, 2015. <http://www.philauu.org/legacy>.

Scope and Contents

This collection consists of administrative and financial records, church registers, correspondence, history materials, and other materials related to the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, as well as papers of the Church's first minister, William Henry Furness, and other individuals associated or involved with the Church, such as Joseph Priestley, John Vaughn, Anders Lunde, Ella Wister Haines, and others. Photographs, audio and video materials, scrapbooks, and newspaper clippings are also included in the collection.

Administrative records include the original Church constitution, 1796; Church by-laws and amendments, 1929-1930; general meeting minutes, 1796-circa 1921, including the Church's first minute book, 1796-1823; Board of Trustees minutes, 1796-1938, 1967-1973, (general meeting minutes and Trustees minutes were kept together from 1796 to 1899, separate from 1900 to 1910, and then together again from 1911 to circa 1917); Trustees reports, 1905-1966; Congregational annual meeting minutes, 1959-1969; pew records, including registers, rental books, and other ledgers and materials, 1828-1907; Fellowship of Youth secretary reports, 1926-1932; and guest books, 1949-1955, 1961-1967.

Financial records include treasurer records such as general records, cash books, and ledgers, circa 1811-1968, as well as receipt books, ledgers, subscriptions lists for the Church and Church projects, cash books, pledge books, day books, account books, aid society ledgers, audits, appraisals, payroll materials, check stubs, bills, deposit slips, church donation/collection record, and bank statements, 1849-1990s.

Correspondence, early 19th century-1970, includes general church correspondence and correspondence of individuals, including William Henry Furness, Joseph Priestley, and John Vaughn.

There are some property and legal materials in the collection, such as deeds for the Church's property at 10th and Locust streets (circa 1824-1828), wills, and rental agreements. There are blueprints and other architectural documents relating to the church building on Chestnut Street, including structural assessments of the building, research related to the Tiffany stained-glass windows and their restoration, and other documents relating to renovations. Other manuscript materials in the collection include church registers of births, deaths, funerals, and marriages, circa 1866-1973; a ledger with lists of burials and those removed to West Laurel Hill Cemetery, 1814-1849; membership records including applications, circa 1950s-1980s; sermons given at the church by Furness and several other ministers, 1825-1980s; and scrapbooks of Church events, 1925-1949.

Also in the collection are various church histories, church anniversary materials, newspaper clippings, lists of ministers, and original handwritten sheet music, as well as research materials (handwritten notes, photocopies of primary source documents) relating to individuals, including Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911), a political rights activist, lecturer, and author. Harper was the first woman of African descent to publish a short story in the United States and a longtime member (1870-1911) of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia.

Photographs in the collection include prints, photograph albums, slides, film negatives, and glass plate negatives depicting images of the church building, church events, ministers, and other individuals.

Audio materials include a few dozen audiocassettes with recordings of sermons, many by Victor H. Carpenter, First Unitarian's minister from 1968 to 1976; members' recollections of the Church; and other topics.

A large portion of papers in the collection are from Dr. Elizabeth M. Geffen, a history professor at Lebanon Valley College, and a member of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. Her papers include research and other materials relating to various books and articles she wrote including the book, *Philadelphia Unitarianism, 1796-1861* and articles "William Henry Furness: Philadelphia Antislavery Preacher," and "Joseph Sill and His Diary." The articles were published in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* in 1958 and 1976, respectively. The materials include handwritten notes and correspondence, photocopies of primary source documents, including Joseph Sill's entire multi-volume diary, newspaper clippings, typed manuscripts, pamphlets, booklets, and other materials. There is also a typed manuscript version of Joseph Sill's diary edited by Geffen in the collection. There are several index card boxes containing Geffen's research notes, organized into five sections: Philadelphia History (general), Individuals Associated with FUCP, Philadelphia Unitarianism (general), Philadelphia Protestantism, and Joseph Sill. Each box's notes are organized alphabetically by topic. There are some notes in the collection that are unfiled.

Of special interest in the collection are papers relating to William Henry Furness, including correspondence, lectures, articles written by him, sermons (including his emancipation sermon from 1863), a notebook with handwritten notes, lists, an address he gave in memorial of Fredrich Schiller's birthday, and other materials. Some of the Furness papers relate to his involvement in the abolitionist movement, including a protest letter against Furness' antislavery preaching with signatures and a "counter-paper" with a list of names supporting Furness' anti-slavery preaching, 1842. Several printed booklets of Furness' sermons have been compiled into five volumes spanning 1825-1869, almost the entire duration of Furness' time as minister.

Administrative Information

First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia Archives

Finding aid prepared by Sarah Leu and Anastasia Matijkiw through the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories.

Sponsor

This preliminary finding aid was created as part of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories. The HCI-PSAR project was made possible by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Access Restrictions

Contact First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia Archives for information about accessing this collection.

Immediate Source of Acquisition Note

Most materials were produced or collected by the Church, but a portion was a gift of the Estate of Dr. Elizabeth M. Geffen, circa 2002

Processing Information Note

Summary descriptive information on this collection was compiled in 2014-2016 as part of a project conducted by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania to make better known and more accessible the largely hidden collections of small, primarily volunteer run repositories in the Philadelphia area. The Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories (HCI-PSAR) was funded by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

This is a preliminary finding aid. No physical processing, rehousing, reorganizing, or folder listing was accomplished during the HCI-PSAR project.

In some cases, more detailed inventories or finding aids may be available on-site at the repository where this collection is held; please contact First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia Archives directly for more information.

Related Materials

Related Archival Materials Note

American Philosophical Society. John Vaughn papers, 1768-circa 1963, Mss.B.V642.

The Athenaeum of Philadelphia. James Dillon Collection.

Controlled Access Headings

Corporate Name(s)

- First Unitarian Church (Philadelphia, Pa.)

Geographic Name(s)

- Philadelphia (Pa.)

Personal Name(s)

- Furness, William Henry, 1802-1896
- Geffen, Elizabeth M. (Elizabeth May), 1913-2002

Subject(s)

- Unitarian church buildings
- Unitarian Universalist churches
- Unitarian Universalists