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THE OLDEST UNIVERSALIST CHURCH IN AMERICA?

*Liberty Universalist Church
 Feasterville, South Carolina*

Most Universalists have been taught that the first Universalist church in America was organized in Gloucester, Massachusetts in 1779. Universalist history might need to be rewritten! In his article *Might South Carolina Be Home To The First Universalist Church In America?*, A. J. Mattill, Jr. argues that Liberty Universalist Church located near Feasterville, South Carolina was actually the first Universalist church in America.

(photos by F. Vernon Chandler)

"LOVE IS THE DOCTRINE OF
 UNIVERSALISM;
 THE QUEST OF TRUTH IS ITS
 SACRAMENT;
 AND SERVICE IS ITS PRAYER.
 TO DWELL TOGETHER IN PEACE;
 TO SEEK KNOWLEDGE IN FREEDOM;
 TO SERVE HUMANITY IN FELLOWSHIP;
 TO THE END THAT ALL SOULS SHALL
 GROW INTO HARMONY WITH
 THE DIVINE,
 THUS DO WE COVENANT WITH EACH
 OTHER AND WITH GOD."

Might South Carolina Be Home To The First Universalist Church In America?

By A. J. Mattill, Jr.

"Where was the first organized church of the Universalist faith?" Answer: "At Gloucester, Massachusetts." This answer is the standard one given by Universalist historians, who tell us that the first Universalist church in America was The Independent Christian Church, Universalist, of Gloucester, founded in 1779. The First Parish Church of Gloucester had suspended four men and eleven women for becoming regular hearers of the Universalist preacher, John Murray (1741-1815), who had come from England to America in 1770. On January 1, 1779 these fifteen people adopted the "Articles of Association: Association of the Independent Church of Gloucester." And they called John Murray to be their first minister. This action is generally regarded as the beginning of organized Universalism in America.

And so it is that The Independent Christian Church, Universalist, of Gloucester has become known as "the Mother Church of American Universalism," and even as "the Mother Church of World Universalism," notwithstanding the fact that Universalism was first organized in 1760 in England by James Relly.

Since northern historians inevitably write with a bit of northern bias, we may now be excused if we look at Universalist origins through southern spectacles and ask, "When and where did organized Universalism in the South begin?"

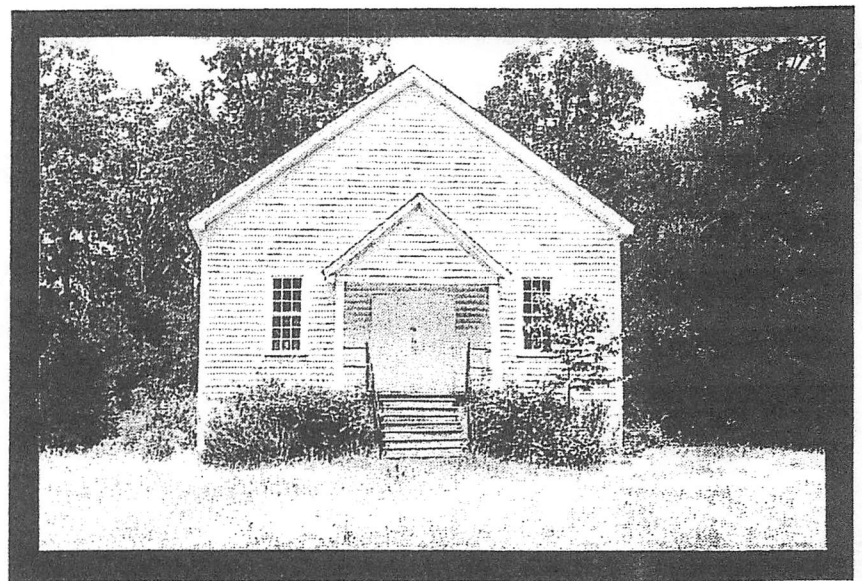
Let us start our search with The Liberty Universalist Church of Louisville, Mississippi, for it is one of the oldest active Universalist churches in the Southeast, having been founded in 1836 or 1842 or 1846 by Universalists who migrated there from The Liberty Universalist Church of Feasterville, South Carolina.

But when and how did this latter church begin? It began in 1749 as a Dunkard Seventh-Day Baptist Church, Liberty Meeting House, Fairfield District. Its minister was David Martin, who adopted Universalist views after reading some writings of the English mystic, William Law (1686-1761), who beautifully portrayed the final restoration of all people to happiness with God. Martin then resigned his pulpit, but to his surprise, the congregation refused to accept his resignation and voted to become Universalist in 1778, according to some historians, in 1777, according to the sign which stands near the church today.

The assistant minister of Liberty Meeting House was John Pearson, who already in 1764 had expressed Universalist beliefs in a letter to his son. In fact, at that time most American Dunkards were Universalist in theology, and therefore it is not hard to believe that Liberty Meeting House became a Universalist Church in 1777.

As G. Wayman McCarty has written in his M.A. thesis, "A History of the Universalist Church in the Mid-South," 1964: "Liberty Meeting House was the first known Dunkard Church to profess Universalism openly, and after that the other Dunkard churches in South Carolina followed its example and switched to Universalism. Thus most of the Universalist churches in the Deep South were descended from these former Dunkard churches in South Carolina."

Similarly, our late editor, Haynie Summers, wrote in a letter of July 27, 1982 that "Liberty Church, South Carolina may well have been the mother of Universalist churches in the Southeast."



Liberty Universalist Church is located off Highway 215 near the community of Feasterville about 35 miles north of Columbia, South Carolina.

(photo by F. Vernon Chandler)

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Might South Carolina Be Home To The First Universalist Church In America?

(continued from page 9)

If, then, Liberty Meeting House became Universalist in 1777, it preceded The Independent Church of Gloucester by a year or two. In other words, Liberty Meeting House should be recognized as the first Universalist church in America rather than the Universalist Church of Gloucester.

And in the sense of being first in time, the original Universalist church in America, Liberty Meeting House should be called "the Mother Church of American Universalism." And in the sense of giving birth to other churches, the Gloucester church could be called "the Mother Church of Northern Universalism," rather than "the Mother Church of American Universalism" and "the Mother Church of World Universalism." And Liberty Meeting House, because of its strong influence in southern Universalist churches, could claim the title of "the Mother Church of Southern Universalism."

And as for John Murray, he should no longer be regarded as "the founder of American Universalism" but as a pioneer of the Universalist movement in America and as the founder of northern Universalism.

And David Martin and John Pearson, ministers of Liberty Meeting House, should be given long overdue credit as pioneers of American Universalism and founders of southern Universalism. As we have said, John Pearson was already expressing his Universalism in 1764, and that was six years before John Murray landed in America in 1770 and preached his first sermon in America on September 30, 1770.

If these claims are true, then the history books will have to be rewritten to give southern Universalism its due in the founding of American Universalism. The Independent Christian Church of Gloucester and John Murray will have to be demoted a little and Liberty Meeting House and David Martin and John Pearson will have to be promoted to their proper place in Universalist history. No longer can historians write that "the Universalist movement in America cannot be said to have begun before the landing of John Murray in 1770 and his subsequent missionary and organizational activity."

Moreover, the history books will have to be revised to recognize the independent nature of southern Universalism. The usual scenario runs like this: American Universalism was founded in the North and from there gradually spread to the South through the missionary efforts of northern Universalists.

My research, however, verifies what McCarty says in his "History": "Even the Universalist historians themselves neglect the South entirely or attribute what little Universalism they recognize to northern missionaries."

The true story is found in *THE UNIVERSALIST MAGAZINE* of September 8, 1827, pp. 47-48, which is the earliest account of Universalism in South Carolina. This article states that the early southern Universalists did not even know of the existence of any American Universalists except themselves. For example, the second or third Universalist minister in the South after David Martin was Giles Chapman, who was unaware of northern American Universalists until he lay on his deathbed in 1819, when a friend read to him Hosea Ballou's *Treatise on Atonement* (see *The Universalist Herald*, August 1985). "So powerful was the effect produced on Chapman's feelings that it seemed to allay his bodily pain, though his sufferings were extreme, and to fill his soul with an extacy (sic) of delight."

Several persons think my thesis is a good one, but they doubt that enough evidence can now be found to support it adequately. Hence if anyone has more information about these matters, please send it to me at Route 2, Box 49, Gordo, Alabama 37466-9516. We may already have waited too long to answer our questions about Universalist origins as thoroughly as we would like, but it will never be any earlier.

(A. J. Mattill, Jr., is minister of Liberty Universalist Church in Louisville, Mississippi.)

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"The secret of happiness is this: let your interests be as wide as possible, and let your reactions to the things and persons that interest you be as far as possible friendly rather than hostile."

Bertrand Russell - *The Conquest of Happiness*

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"Happiness grows at our own firesides, and is not to be picked in strangers' gardens." Douglas Jerrold

* * *

"We are never so happy, nor so unhappy, as we suppose ourselves to be." La Rochefoucauld