

**Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration**  
**January 29, 2012**  
**Rev. Kathryn Ellis**

**Universalism in Philadelphia: Elhannon Winchester and Benjamin Rush**

Last week, I talked about George DeBenneville and his important contributions to universalism. One of those contributions was convincing Elhannon Winchester of universal restoration. Some have discounted DeBenneville's importance in the history of American Universalism because he did not start a church. Winchester and Rush were part of creating Universalist institutions, both churches and the wider organizations, Universalist Conventions. Winchester's church is a direct ancestor of this congregation. He founded the Universal Baptists before 1785 and in 1789 that group combined with a group influenced by John Murray to become the "First Independent Church of Christ, commonly called Universalists." "Followers of Winchester formed the "Second Independent Church of Christ, commonly called Universalists" in Northern Liberties in 1820.

We've had several name changes and several different addresses but that is this congregation. That is the charter that we have here; those first members are listed in our membership book. Originally from Massachusetts, Elhannon Winchester was a Baptist minister in 1774 to serve a congregation in South Carolina. He organized a church for slaves and preached against slavery. "The prejudices which the slaves had against Christianity, on account of the severities practiced upon them by professing Christians, both ministers and people, might be one principle reason why they could not be brought to religious instruction. But they had no prejudice against me on that score, as I never had any thing to do with slavery, but on the contrary condemned it; . . .(so) they shewed a disposition to attend my ministry.. ." He later published *The Reining Abominations, Especially the Slave Trade*.

Winchester was first influenced towards Universalism when he read DeBenneville's translation of *The Everlasting Gospel* in 1778. But he wasn't convinced at first. "He was in this undetermined state when he moved to a flourishing Baptist congregation in Philadelphia. By 1780 he was ready to believe but he was not willing to upset his audience by expressing his new views publicly."<sup>i</sup>

Winchester was just 30 years old when he met DeBenneville in 1781. DeBenneville's friendship helped to strengthen Winchester's convictions. He later wrote, "I became so well persuaded of the truth of the Universal Restoration that I was determined never to deny it, let it cost me ever so much, though all my numerous friends should forsake me as I expected they would."<sup>ii</sup>

Universalism was a threatening, dangerous idea and it did lead a minority in his church to dismiss him. Winchester and his supporters organized the Society of Universal Baptists and they worshipped at the University of Pennsylvania. Winchester was a popular preacher presenting the emotional and intellectual arguments for

Universalism.<sup>iii</sup> He went to England and spread the good news of universalism there for several years. While in England, he wrote and published one of the most influential universalist books of any era, *Dialogues on the Universal Restoration*.<sup>iv</sup> This book was influential well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century; reading it converted the first minister of this congregation, Abner Kneeland, to Universalism.

Winchester was also involved with the beginnings of Universalism as a denomination. He served as moderator of the First Universalist Convention held in Oxford, Massachusetts in 1785. In Philadelphia, Winchester's preaching convinced one of Philadelphia's most prominent figures, Dr. Benjamin Rush. Rush wrote that Winchester was "irresistible in his reasonings upon all subjects."<sup>v</sup> After hearing Winchester preach, he wrote, "I have never doubted upon the subject of the salvation of all men."<sup>vi</sup> Sounds like powerful preaching to me!

By 1790, there were several Universalist congregations in the Mid-Atlantic and "the need for an organizational structure became increasingly urgent."<sup>vii</sup> They organized a convention in Philadelphia in 1790 which met for two weeks. Benjamin Rush was "a major force"<sup>viii</sup> behind this meeting.

We know Rush as an important historic figure – signer of the Declaration of Independence, friend of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and Joseph Priestley, physician to George Washington, father of American psychiatry. You may not know that he was also the founder of Dickinson College where my husband works.

We don't generally think of him as the first great Universalist social activist, but he was and intentionally so. "In his time, Rush had no peer as a social reformer. Among the many causes he championed – most of them several generations ahead of all other reformers – were prison and judicial reform, abolition of slavery and the death penalty, (humane treatment of the insane), education of women conservation of natural resources, proper diet, abstinence from tobacco and strong drink and the appointment of a 'Secretary of Peace' to the federal cabinet."<sup>ix</sup>

"Rush insisted that Universalism and (democratic) government were part of the same unfolding process, and that social action is an inescapable consequence of Universalist faith."<sup>x</sup> He wrote, "A belief in God's universal love to all his creatures, and that he will finally restore all those of them that are miserable to happiness, is a *polar* truth. It leads to truths upon all subjects more especially on upon the subject of government. It establishes the equality of mankind – it abolishes the punishment of death – and converts jails into houses of repentance and reformation."<sup>xi</sup>

At the Philadelphia Convention in 1790, the delegates agreed on "Articles of Faith" and a "Plan of Church Government" written by Dr. Rush. Universalists were careful to say that these articles of faith were not a creed, but a statement of things generally believed.

Winchester and Rush were committed. Their light, their beacon helped lead the way to this very congregation. Much of the work that they started remains for us to continue. May we be guided by their faith set free from fear and be committed in our work in the world.

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<sup>i</sup> Cassara, Ernest. *Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith, Third, Revised Edition..* Boston: Skinner House, 1997, p. 15.

<sup>ii</sup> Elhannon Winchester @ <http://www25-temp.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/elhannonwinchester.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Cassara, Ernest. *Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith, Third, Revised Edition..* Boston: Skinner House, 1997, p. 16.

<sup>iv</sup> "Elhannon Winchester @ <http://www25-temp.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/elhannonwinchester.html>

<sup>v</sup> Elhannon Winchester @ <http://www25-temp.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/elhannonwinchester.html>

<sup>vi</sup> "Benjamin Rush" @ <http://www25-temp.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/benjaminrush.html>

<sup>vii</sup> Bumbaugh, David E. *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History.* Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2000, p. 152..

<sup>viii</sup> Bumbaugh, David E. *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History.* Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2000, p. 152..

<sup>ix</sup> Winchester @ <http://www25-temp.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/elhannonwinchester.html>

<sup>x</sup> Bumbaugh, David E. *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History.* Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2000, p. 152..

<sup>xi</sup> Cassara, Ernest. *Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith, Third, Revised Edition..* Boston: Skinner House, 1997, pp. 92-93.