Rogers, Shinn, and Garner:

A History of Universalism in Alabama in Three Vignettes

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Locations in Alabama with verified Universalist Activity, 1834-1961.
Churches as institutions, whether local or denominational, respond to the needs of the culture within which they are embedded, even as they are themselves shaped by that culture. The Universalist denomination in Alabama was shaped by the changing historic, geographic, and cultural context of the South: a frontier in the early 19th century, a war zone in the mid-to-late century, and, in the 20th century, a region in which the divide between rural and urban communities would grow deep and troublesome.

One of the cultural pastimes most loved in the South is storytelling; and it is in the spirit of the storyteller that this paper will relate the history of the Universalist Church in Alabama through the stories of three key Universalist ministers: George Rogers, Quillen Shinn, and Richard Smith. Their stories reveal the ways in which Universalism developed differently in Alabama than in other parts of the country, and how the dedication of Universalists to liberal religion in the South contributed directly to the establishment of the contemporary Unitarian Universalist movement.

First Sightings of Universalism in Alabama

Alabama was admitted to the Union in 1817, and grew in population from about 9,000 people in 1810 to over 300,000 in 1830. Many of these settlers came from the Carolinas, where land had been overfarmed and state legislators refused to use tax money to provide benefits such as road improvements and schools.¹ They were drawn toward the “black belt”, the southern

¹ "Searching for Greener Pastures: Out-Migration in the 1800s and 1900s," Tar Heel Junior Historian 34, no. 2 (Spring 1995) copyright North Carolina Museum of History.
portion of the state where the rich soil was ideal for cotton growing; and those with means often brought enslaved persons with them.

Some of these Carolina migrants brought the Universalist faith to Alabama. John J. Slaughter, born in 1807 in Monroe County, Georgia, was converted to Universalism as a young man and brought it to the settlement near the Methodist camp meeting just south of Columbus, Georgia. This settlement would become Camp Hill, Alabama, the largest Universalist church in the South, and the only Alabama Universalist church that remains today. The congregation in Brewton was also founded by a South Carolinian migrant, D.B. Clayton, who brought the faith with him to south Alabama.

George Rogers and Antebellum Universalism

It is difficult to know where the very first Universalists gathered in Alabama. A reasonable guess is Montgomery, where historian Richard Eddy claims “so far as we are informed, Rev. W[illis] Atkins was the pioneer preacher, about 1832. In 1834 he organized churches at Mount Olympus and Montgomery” and buildings for these congregations were erected the same year.

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In February of 1837, a Universalist circuit rider named George Rogers entered the state from the Mississippi border, and began a preaching tour, recalling his lively adventures in an engaging memoir. Rogers describes the people of West Alabama as uneducated and indifferent to religion, preoccupied with the booming business of growing cotton. He nevertheless preached a nighttime sermon to a large gathering of planters awaiting a shipping vessel, before going on to Greensborough, Marion, Shady Grove, Selma, and finally Montgomery, where he preached in the building erected by Rev. Atkins three years before. Rogers describes the building:

“surmounted with a steeple and bell, and furnished with an excellent organ. It was gotten up, however, and entirely supported by three individuals… It might have been foreseen, methinks, that it could not live long under such circumstances.”

The support of a church by a single family or small group of families would become a theme in the story of Universalist churches in Alabama, even into the twentieth century.

Rogers’ account reveals not only the character of life in Alabama and a view on the different kinds of people who lived there, it also reveals something of the state of Universalist social views in the antebellum South – some progressive, and some offensive by contemporary standards. During his stay in Marion, for example, the crowd that gathers to hear Rogers’ sermon is exclusively male. Rogers takes personal offense that no women have been allowed to hear him speak:

Since leaving home, I had not before addressed an audience of this character, and I scolded a little upon this ground, at Marion. Whether I showed good judgment in scolding the gentlemen for the absence of the ladies, I care not to have decided; but really I don’t like

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to be treated as if I were a traveling philosopher, who taught matters too high for female comprehension or unconnected with female interests.⁷

Rogers also tells of encounters with religious groups that may have disappeared from the American religious landscape, including the “Live-Forevers” and the “Tunkers… who in this country are called Universalists; and they so call themselves.”⁸

The Tunkers may have been Primitive Baptist Universalists, or “No-Hellers”, an Appalachian sect whose adherents held to a form of universal salvation theology but were not associated with the Universalist conventions.

Rogers describes the Choctaw and Creek Indians, not yet forced from their land, as at once exotic and terrifying; he describes African Americans as “in general very ignorant, and prone to superstition.”⁹ In the congregation at Mount Olympus, Rogers meets

a free colored man… the first Universalist person of color I have ever seen, [who was] decidedly opposed to the measures of the abolitionists, and that he regarded the slavery of the African race in the light of a providential visitation upon them… that, like all the divine dispensations, it will have a benevolent issue; at some future day they will be delivered of their captivity… he approves of the colonization measures, and remarked that he himself would emigrate to Liberia, but for the fear that the colony there being strongly sectarian in its character, would not comport with his enjoyment of the rights of conscience.¹⁰

This remarkable exchange is followed by a further explanation from a wealthy slave-owner, who tells Rogers that African Americans are not inclined to convert to Universalism because “they all want their masters damned, and think it hardly fair dealing to make them as

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⁷ Rogers, Memoranda, 214.
⁹ Rogers, Memoranda, 218.
¹⁰ Rogers, Memoranda, 218-219.
happy as their negroes in the next world.” Nevertheless, Universalism in Alabama was not completely without persons of color.

Antebellum Universalism and Slavery

Antebellum southern Universalists held complex attitudes toward the institution of African slavery. Some felt that the institution was immoral but “reacted with defensiveness to the ‘unchristian’ meddling of their northern brethren” whose own views on slavery were inconsistent and even hypocritical (northern conventions continued to ordain slaveholding ministers, for example, despite their abolitionist positions).

Most southern ministers, however, openly favored slavery and denounced abolition, tending toward regional loyalty rather than scriptural or moral rationale. The Universalist Herald, under the editorial leadership of state Universalist patriarch J.C. Burruss, even ran advertisements for the purchase of enslaved people.11 J.M.H. Smith, a minister in Huntsville, AL, wrote to the Herald in 1855,

charging northern Universalist abolitionists with disrupting the unity of the denomination. A northerner had asserted that the Universalist denomination was shamed because of the course of Universalist ministers in the South. Smith denied these charges and called for a southern convention to encourage the southern press and pass resolutions protecting southern property. He expressed the wish that the two branches of the church remain in a unified denomination, but he believed the painful duty called for a split. Smith had lived in the South for ten years. He declared that he did not intend to “defend the evils of slavery. That there are evils-in that and all other institutions, I also contend. Name an evil, or an

abuse of society, where slavery exists, and I will direct you to an equivalent where it does not exist.”

Smith’s reasoning is typical of the rational, non-scriptural arguments that distinguished the Universalist defense of slavery from those of their evangelical coreligionists.

No matter which side of the debate a minister took, however, “Unitarian and Universalist doctrines aroused suspicions [in the South], for they ran counter to… reliance on the Word with proslavery doctrine. Southern Universalists… accepted slavery, but that was not good enough” – the doctrine of the fraternity of humankind cast Universalism in a doubtful light. This local skepticism, combined with the congregational polity of Universalist gatherings, prevented the faith from establishing itself firmly enough to thrive during the Civil War.

Postbellum Universalist Resurgence and the Missions of Quillen Shinn

Universalism struggled during the war, but the denomination did not split. The Alabama convention managed to reorganize and continue on an unbroken but badly tattered thread, owing mostly to the efforts of J.C. Burrell, publisher of the Universalist Herald, who had been the convention’s longtime president. “During the war, and for a few years after its close,” writes Richard Eddy, editor of the Universalist Register, “Universalism was at a low ebb and its organization badly demoralized in Alabama. The State Convention was reorganized in 1870… None of the parishes are strong, either numerically or financially.” The Register has no church records for Alabama between 1864 and 1867, and when statistics reappear in 1868, only two

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14 Eddy, Universalism, 366.
churches are recorded: Notasulga and Wetumpka, the centers of Universalist activity near Montgomery since the first appearance of the denomination in the state in 1832.

The faith had a modest rebound during the Reconstruction years, seeing some of its prewar preaching stations and churches reorganize. Northerners of all types saw opportunity in the war-ravaged South, and the Universalists were no exception. By 1876, the Register records that there were “eight preachers who are welcomed on their missionary journeys in many a city and neighborhood where there are scattered Universalists; but what are these few preachers compared to the broad extent of the State, embracing a territory nearly as large as the six New England states?”  

Attendance began to wane once again in the 1880s, and several congregations went dormant.

Help was on the way, as the Universalist General Convention appointed Quillen Shinn its General Missionary in 1895, and sanctioned the specialization of his mission by naming him Missionary to the South five years later. Shinn seemed a born missionary, and toured Alabama three or four times annually during his Southern excursions, faithfully keeping records of his visits in breastpocket diaries and reporting on his travels to the Universalist Leader.

One of his first trips took him to Birmingham, founded in 1871 as an industrial city of the New South – a city that did not carry the burden of Reconstruction. Shinn saw great promise in the “Pittsburgh of the South”, and repeatedly appealed to Universalist bodies, including the Alabama convention, to invest resources in Birmingham. “I cannot conceive of a greater mistake our denomination might make,” Shinn wrote to the Leader, “than not to establish a church in this

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15 Skinner, Joseph ed. The Universalist Register and Almanac for 1876, (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1876), 21.
city, which, as men of good judgment say, might number half a million in thirty more years."16

Shinn’s warning would echo some years later, as Universalists struggled to maintain a presence in the city with limited funding from either the General or State conventions.

Shinn also bolstered the ministries of the existing churches in Alabama, and the years of his Southern mission saw tremendous growth in a few of these churches. He was responsible for the erecting of a new building for the Florala church in 1903, which saw its membership triple in the following five years. Shinn used the same method for establishing Universalist societies that he used elsewhere in the country:

He would advertise his coming through billboards and flyers, announcing one or more meetings to be held in a place he had reserved—a church, public hall, store, home, whatever was available. At these meetings he would preach the Universalist message, entertain questions, and explain how a new Universalist group could be organized. If there was enough interest, he would select a leader to coordinate the group's efforts at organizing a building fund, a ladies' aid society, a youth group, and other activities. Having laid this groundwork, he would return periodically, hoping to organize a church and find it a part-time minister.17

Though Shinn was criticized for not doing enough to ensure the stability of the congregations he founded – and indeed many of his congregations did not survive – his efforts in Alabama were enough to revive the faith in the postbellum period and lay down the foundation that would support the establishment of Unitarian fellowships half a century later. An element of

16 The Universalist Leader, Feb. 28, 1906.
Shinn’s success may have been the conservatism of his message; a champion of temperance and a believer in the centrality of the Bible, Shinn’s Universalist gospel more closely aligned with the religious sentiments of the postwar South than with New England Universalism.

One further item of Shinn’s activity in Alabama could fill a book of its own, but will only earn a brief mention here: the founding of the Southern Industrial Institute near the church in Camp Hill. The Camp Hill congregation was one of the oldest in Alabama and was the largest gathering throughout the years, with membership over 150 even during the Civil War. Shinn collaborated with its minister, Lyman Ward, who had come from New York as a visiting minister who already dreamed of building a school “similar in scope to the schools in Hampton and Tuskegee, only this school was to be for white youth.”

Shinn himself dreamed of a Southern seminary to train Universalist ministers, who often, he had discovered, left the South to attend Northern seminaries and found themselves attracted to the larger salaries they found there.

Though Ward “met with opposition because he was a ‘Yankee’, a ‘Republican’, and also a Universalist… he conquered these prejudices” and became the settled minister at Camp Hill. He and Shinn began raising money for the school, and opened the doors to its first students in 1898. Shinn was named the first president of the school, and determined that it should always have a theological department. Ward, however, had difficulty securing denominational funds (the General Convention never recognized the school as an official organ of the church), and southern parents were suspicious of sending their children to a Universalist school. Within a few years, several supporters threatened to withhold funds if the school continued as a Universalist

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18 From Ward’s account of the history of the founding of the Institute, in a pamphlet advertising the school, included in the papers of Quillen Shinn in the archives at Andover Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School, accessed March 2017.
19 *Heritage of Tallapoosa County*, 369.
institution, so with disappointment Shinn withdrew from the operation of the school and the theological department was closed. The school still functions today as the Lyman Ward Military Academy.

Figure 3: Students of the Southern Industrial Institute.

The Birmingham Controversy

Quillen Shinn’s missions to Alabama ushered in a golden age of Universalism in the state. New buildings were being planned, and preaching stations had been established along many highways across the southern half of the state. The state convention had been reorganized in 1900, and though Shinn died in 1907 and his missions were discontinued, church membership continued to rise.

The character of the Alabama State Convention was of a group of families who had established churches as, in some cases, little more than brush arbors, and had with their own family fortunes accumulated the land, buildings, and ministers of the church. Names like Weed,
Foshee, McGowan, Miller, and Langley, which appear in the minutes of the convention and in the Universalist Register for decades, also appear in the town charters and on street signs in the towns where the churches were established. This concentration of power among rural families, and their failure to broaden the movement after World War I, led to the diminishment and near extinction of the faith in the years preceding the consolidation of the Unitarian and Universalist denominations.

A gap in the records leaves little to tell from 1912 until 1918, when a scandal began to brew in Birmingham. F.B. Bishop, the newly appointed Southern Superintendent for the Universalist General Convention, and John Smith Lowe, its general secretary, wrote in the Universalist Leader in 1921 and 1922 of the progress of a new congregation in Birmingham, the First Universalist Church:

Mr. Bishop… had hardly settled himself in his new field of labor when he made a start in Birmingham. A society was organized and services held in a small motion picture house. Mr. [Prescott] Kelly, a strong representative businessman, was elected president… Rev. C.E. Clark was secured to take charge of the Birmingham work… The audiences have grown. A Sunday school has been organized. The membership has increased. A fine group of men make up the board of trustees. Some equally excellent women make up the personnel of a strong Mission Circle.

It is not clear whether this is the same group of Universalists gathered by Quillen Shinn in the late 1890s. But what is clear is that this was not the only group of Universalists in Birmingham. Another pair of ministers, Richard Smith and Robert Garner, had established the Church of the Messiah in Birmingham in 1917. Smith was a former Methodist minister who had

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20 The name “First Universalist Church” appears in F.B. Bishop’s column “The Southern Field” in the *Universalist Leader*, Vol. XXVI No. 45, November 12, 1921.

been converted to Universalism and ordained by Lyman Ward. In 1920, Smith wrote an angry letter to Lowe, stating that he had been ordered by the state convention to stop preaching in Birmingham, and arguing that he would obey no such order. Smith did not reveal in this letter why he had been ordered to stop preaching. In a follow-up letter, Smith described the nature of his call, his status as an ordained minister, and the extent of his work in Birmingham, in what seems to be an attempt to convince Lowe of the righteousness of his cause.

Lowe responded to these letters by expressing his regret that Smith, whom he had never met, was in this situation, but “the feeling of the trustees of the General Convention is that your labors after a long term of years have produced such meager results that they are hardly warranted in the assumption that you are qualified to represent the Universalist denomination to advantage in the City of Birmingham.”

Smith replied to Lowe in a letter dated April 28, 1920 that his church had obeyed the state convention and ceased its services; but then followed it with a letter less than a month later, on May 16 emphatically declaring, to the contrary, that he would not cease his work in Birmingham, and hoped that he would not be disfellowshipped for it. Only a week later, Smith began to reorganize the Church of the Messiah so that it could continue outside the purview of the Universalist denomination. The new organization was called the Society for Reform in Religious Doctrine.

Surprisingly, Smith remained active in the Alabama convention for several years after this incident, even serving in leadership roles: in 1925, Smith chaired the very same recommendations committee that in 1921 had thrown its support behind the First Universalist Church. It is hard to reconcile this with his defensiveness about the refusal of support for his ministry in Birmingham, nor with the convention’s broad and public support for the First
Universalist Church of Birmingham, which in 1922 was approved for an increase from half-time to full-time ministry. What was the nature of his ministry with the Church of the Messiah, and why did the state convention deny its support?

No conclusive answer can be found in the documents of the state convention. But there are two possibilities. First, the Church of the Messiah may have been too theologically liberal to satisfy the convention’s sensibilities. The church’s charter included such provisions as:

“The protesting against the doctrine of the infallibility of the Bible…”
“The members of this subsidiary Church retain their membership in the churches of their convictions, or in the synagogue”
“The uniting of Jews and Christians, for the purifying of Christianity and the inspiration of Judaism”
“Any may be members of this individual Church who wish to promote its general aims, and who hunger and thirst after God, or after Holiness.”

When Smith reorganized the church as the Society for Reform in Religious doctrine, many of the provisions of this charter were retained, but all mentions of God were removed. These charters, which make room not only for Jews but for atheists or skeptics, are considerably broader in theological scope than might have been comfortable for the decidedly Christian southern Universalists of the Alabama convention.

Another possibility can be found in a letter from Robert Garner, Smith’s co-minister, to the American Unitarian Association in 1932. Garner wrote to ask for financial assistance for his mission in Birmingham, which he describes thus: “for the past eight years I have devoted almost my entire time that I could spare for ministerial work to an independent work… among the colored race of Birmingham.” Garner explains that his service to this community included instruction in liberal morality and hygiene, and food and money distribution. If in 1932 Garner had been carrying on the work for eight years, perhaps he and Smith had been engaged in such a
mission before Smith was ordered to stop serving in the name of Universalism. There is a possibility that the state convention, dominated by rural families who had held power in the state for decades, did not want to support a Universalist mission to African Americans.

The Unified Church and the Roots of the Unitarian Fellowship

Even though the convention put its strength behind the First Universalist Church in Birmingham, it did not last, for reasons that remain unclear. In any case, the Universalists did not give up on Birmingham. Letters among ministers and officials of the General Convention in the 1920s point toward the formation of a unified liberal church, to be organized with the Unitarians. The finance committee of the General Convention declined to allocate funds toward the Birmingham project in 1928 – a missed opportunity, for as the country fell into depression, neither the Unitarians nor the Universalists would have funding to expand their territories.

The urge to form a unified church arose from a disagreement about the best way to preserve Universalism in Alabama. In the state convention minutes of 1926, superintendent George Gay stated that while a sizable contingent of Universalists remains in Birmingham, and that the convention “plans to continue with this undertaking… the superintendent feels that the churches of our state which have been organized for years… must have his attention first”, and that “any really permanent work in a city the size of Birmingham will require a large investment of money.” The following year, the convention minutes stated that “work at Birmingham was discontinued by our state convention, and the way cleared for action by the Unitarian and Universalist Denominations.”
A series of letters between Harold Scott, the minister of the Brewton congregation, and Robert Etz, now serving as the General Secretary, reveals the nature of the disagreement. Scott wrote to Etz asking, “hypothetically”, about the possibility of securing funding for a renewed effort in Birmingham. Etz replied that “the rural work and the city work must be carried on together”, with rural churches serving as feeders to the urban ones. Scott writes back: “Surely you do not think that the way to build a church in the city is to build several churches in villages that can never be self supporting. That is precisely what we have been doing in Alabama for seventy five years. If that were the way to build city churches we would already have several in this state.”

These exchanges reveal a divide between rural and urban work. The rural congregations had been “self supporting” for decades – that is, supported almost exclusively by the funds of the families which made up the membership – but did not have the financial resources to expand into urban fields and support full-time ministry there; nor were they inclined to risk the theological and structural changes they would face in the city, as they had glimpsed with Richard Smith’s attempt to establish a progressive church in Birmingham. The Universalist General Convention was disinclined to give money to the rural churches for fear that they would stop putting up resources of their own, and either did not have adequate funds for a solid urban mission or did not want to supply funds without a match from the state convention.

The Birmingham Universalists were now left without a sponsor, but not without hope. Prescott Kelly, the first president of the First Universalist Church in Birmingham established by F.B. Bishop, and a few remaining members of that church began a correspondence with the American Unitarian Association in the 1940s that resulted in the establishment of the Birmingham Unitarian Fellowship in 1952, which shortly thereafter would become the Unitarian
Church of Birmingham and still exists today as the Unitarian Universalist Church of
Birmingham. Space limitations forbid the retelling of this story in full detail, but the connection
between Prescott Kelly and the contemporary church brings the Birmingham story full circle.

As for the Universalists, the state convention continued to meet until 1960; all church real
estate was liquidated in advance of the denominational consolidation, save for the church at
Camp Hill, which continues to meet monthly to this day.

Conclusion

The story of Unitarian Universalism in the South is often told today from the exclusive
perspective of the Unitarian Fellowship movement, with its bias toward urban settlement,
university culture, and humanism. Yet George Rogers, Quillen Shinn, and Richard Smith
brought a liberal Christian message to a largely rural population, a needed complement to what
would become a very conservative religious climate. Their work provided the platform upon
which Unitarian Universalism would eventually settle, and though their perspectives are rarely
seen or understood well by modern Unitarian Universalists, their influence can still be felt in
Alabama churches today.