Some interesting Unitarian folks

Compiled by Rev. Jennifer L. Brower, Oct. 2019

* Michael Servetus (c.1506-October 27, 1553), a Spaniard martyred in the Reformation for his criticism of the doctrine of the trinity and his opposition to infant baptism, has often been considered an early unitarian. Sharply critical though he was of the orthodox formulation of the trinity. Servetus is better described as a highly unorthodox trinitarian. Still, aspects of his thinking—his critique of existing trinitarian theology, his devaluation of the doctrine of original sin, and his fresh examination of biblical proof-texts did influence those who later inspired or founded unitarian churches in Poland and Transylvania. Public criticism of those responsible for his execution, the Reform Protestants in Geneva and their pastor, John Calvin, moreover, stirred proto-unitarians and other groups on the radical left-wing of the Reformation to develop and later institutionalize their own heretical views. Widespread aversion to Servetus's death has been taken as signaling the birth in Europe of the idea of religious tolerance, a principle now more important to modern Unitarian Universalists than antitrinitarianism. Servetus is also celebrated as a pioneering physician. He was the first European to publish a description of the blood's circulation through the lungs.

* Correction: My older than middle aged brain remembered Servetus as being Italian. Oy vey... my apologies for misleading you!

Francis David (c.1520 – 15 November 1579), also known as, Ferenc Dávid, was the founder of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania, and highly influential in encouraging King John II Sigismund Zápolya of Hungary to issue the Edict of Torda (1568), granting religious freedom to Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists and Unitarians.

"There is no greater mindlessness and absurdity than to force conscience and the spirit with external power, when only their creator has authority for them." As quoted in "The Transylvania Journey" by Rev. Michael McGee (25 July 2004), and in Whose God? and Three Related Works (2007) by Benjamin C. Godfrey, p. 61

"Neither the sword of popes, nor the cross, nor the image of death — nothing will halt the march of truth. I wrote what I felt and that is what I

preached with trusting spirit. I am convinced that after my destruction the teachings of false prophets will collapse."

His last message, carved onto the walls of his dungeon cell, as quoted in For Faith and Freedom (1997) by Charles A. Howe, p. 109

Misattributed to David an oft-cited phrase: "We need not think alike to love alike."

This attribution seems to have begun in the 1960s, and has been debunked at "Who really said that?" by Peter Hughes at UU World (15 August 2012); previously misattributed in A Chosen Faith (1991) by John A. Buehrens; also in Unitarian Universalist Origins: Our Historic Faith by Mark W. Harris

Some interesting Universalist folks

John Murray

(December 10, 1741-September 3, 1815), a preacher from the British Isles, became the most widely-known and respected voice of American Universalism during the last three decades of the eighteenth century.

* Look online for the "miracle" story of Murray's sad departure from England and his arrival in the New World.*

A legal conflict surrounding his ministry was instrumental in undermining the monopoly of the established church in Massachusetts and in bringing about the legal organization of the first Universalist churches in New England. It was his vision that led to the first moves towards uniting the various independent American Universalist movements into a single denomination.

While serving pulpits in Gloucester and Boston, he traveled frequently to Philadelphia and the mid-Atlantic states, being for a long time the only point of contact between Universalists there and those in New England.

A friend of Generals George Washington and Nathanael Greene, and the husband of the literary pioneer Judith Sargent Murray, Murray moved in distinguished circles, which brought much-needed respectability, and a sense of self-respect, to a denomination comprised largely of shopkeepers and middling farmers. In his later years he was revered by many Universalists, including those with whom he disagreed, and regarded as primus inter pares among the generation of Universalist founders who treated him as if he were the denomination's bishop.

Thomas Starr King (December 17, 1824 – March 4, 1864), often known as Starr King, was an American Universalist and Unitarian minister, influential in California politics during the American Civil War, and Freemason. Starr King spoke zealously in favor of the Union and was credited by Abraham Lincoln with preventing California from becoming a separate republic. He is sometimes referred to as "the orator who saved the nation".

He was born on December 17, 1824, in New York City to Rev. Thomas Farrington King, a Universalist minister, and Susan Starr King. The sole support of his family at 15, he was forced to leave school. Inspired by men like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Ward Beecher, King embarked on a program of self-study for the ministry. At the age of 20 he took over his father's former pulpit at the Charlestown Universalist Church in Charlestown, Massachusetts.

In 1860 he accepted a call from the First Unitarian Church of San Francisco, California. In July of that year, he visited Yosemite and was moved spiritually by its splendor. Upon returning to San Francisco, he began preaching a series of sermons on Yosemite, published letters about it in the Boston Evening Transcript, and aligned himself with fellow abolitionist and landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, to have Yosemite set aside as a reserve. Yosemite would become a California State Park and eventually a national park. Starr King joined the Freemasons and was raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason in Oriental Lodge No. 144 in San Francisco, now Phoenix Lodge No. 144, and served as grand orator of the Grand Lodge of California in 1863.

During the Civil War, Starr King spoke zealously in favor of the Union and was credited by Abraham Lincoln with preventing California from becoming a separate republic. At the urging of Jessie Benton Frémont, Starr King teamed up with writer Bret Harte, and Starr King read Harte's patriotic poems at pro-Union speeches. Starr King also read original verses by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and James Russell Lowell which captured the imagination of the Californians. In a letter by Starr King wrote to James T. Fields, the editor of the Atlantic Monthly, "The state must be Northernized thoroughly, by schools, Atlantic Monthlies, lectures, N.E. preachers." On George Washington's birthday in 1861, King spoke for two hours to over a thousand people about how they should remember Washington by preserving the Union.

The relentless lecture circuit exhausted him, and he died in San Francisco on March 4, 1864, of diphtheria and pneumonia. His dying words were said to be, "Keep my memory green." Over twenty thousand people attended his funeral and several of his friends including Charles Stoddard, Bret Harte and Ina Coolbrith published tributes. King is interred at First Unitarian Church of San Francisco between Starr King and Geary Streets in San Francisco. In the 1940s, most of San Francisco's dead were disinterred and moved to new resting places outside city limits; the grave of Starr King was one of the very few allowed to remain undisturbed.

Quillen Hamilton Shinn (January 1, 1845-September 6, 1907), Universalist minister and well-traveled missionary, is known as the "St. Paul of the Universalist Church." He has been credited with starting at least 40 churches and inspiring nearly 30 persons to enter the ministry.

Shinn had a standard method of operation in evangelizing a town. 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. Because he made so many stops in his travels and his visits were so brief, his detractors claimed that he spread his efforts too widely, and called him the "Grasshopper Missionary." Although most of the groups Shinn started failed to survive for long, a number did, and, whatever the outcome, he had spread the Universalist message. He was the best-known Universalist in the country.

After five years the General Convention redefined Shinn's role geographically by naming him Missionary to the Southern States, working under the direction of <u>Isaac M. Atwood</u>, its newly appointed first General

Superintendent. Atwood, unsympathetic to Shinn's methods and mindful of the shortage of clergy, wished to restrict church extension to a few urban centers. Because the General Convention was hard pressed financially to maintain both a General Superintendent and a Southern Missionary, Shinn narrowly avoided, in 1901 and in 1903, having his office abolished. Among his accomplishments as Missionary to the Southern States, he played a leading part in the establishment of missions in Norfolk and Suffolk, Virginia to serve African Americans and the "Friendly House" mission in the mountains of western North Carolina.

Shinn's message remained essentially unchanged throughout his career, reflecting his belief in the centrality of the Bible, the love of God, the parenthood of God, the immortality of the soul, the divinity (though not the deity) of Christ, the certainty of punishment for sin, and the universality of salvation. He contended that "there is no hell for any of us to fear, outside of ourselves." He had no use for modern Biblical criticism, was suspicious of liberalism of any kind, disliked Unitarians with their "go-as-you-please church," and was an uncompromising opponent of the use of alcohol, tobacco, and profanity. While not a social activist in the usual sense of that term, he was an active member of the National Prison Association and at one time served as chair of a denominational committee on penal reform. He was an unremitting adversary of capital punishment and a strong supporter of women's rights.

First Women Ordained

Universalists

Olympia Brown is known as the first woman minister whose ordination was recognized by a denomination. She spent a lifetime working for women's suffrage and was among the few original suffragists still alive to vote, at long last, in 1919.

Olympia Brown was born to a Universalist family who valued education. Determined to seek higher education, she persuaded her father to allow her and a younger sister to go to college, first at Mary Lyons's Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in Massachusetts, and then at the better-suited Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Brown felt called to the Universalist ministry, and sought admission to theological school, although this was not an option open to women. She finally persuaded the president of St. Lawrence University to admit her in 1861. In her autobiography she writes, "Mr. Ebenezer Fisher, the President, replied that I would be admitted but he did not think women were called to the ministry." She continues, "President Fisher, in spite of his discomfiture at my entering the school, was just to me as a student, and never discriminated against me until I began to take steps toward ordination." When Brown completed her course of study in 1863, she had to convince the male ministers of the St. Lawrence Universalist Association to vote to ordain her so she could be called to parish ministry. The positive reception she received when she preached at local churches swayed the opinions of many of the ministers in her favor and Brown was ordained. She says, "Mr. Fisher had so far overcome his feelings that he took part in the [ordination] exercises."

After ordination, Brown served the church in Weymouth Landing, Massachusetts. With the blessing of her congregation, she spent months in Kansas speaking on behalf of women's suffrage, making her own living and speaking arrangements as she traveled. In 1870, she accepted a call to the Bridgeport, Connecticut, church. She married in 1873, keeping her own name, and gave birth to her first child the next year. In 1874, she decided to resign her ministry, although she continued to live in Bridgeport for two more years, giving birth to a second child in 1876.

After careful consideration of her calling and her options after her resignation from Bridgeport, Brown wrote to Mr. A. C. Fish, the clerk of the Universalist Church in Racine, Wisconsin, to offer her services. He wrote back that the parish was in an unfortunate condition, thanks to "a series of pastors easy-going, unpractical, and some even spiritually unworthy, who had left the church adrift, in debt, hopeless, and doubtful whether any pastor could again rouse them." Brown accepted the challenge, and she and her family moved to Racine in 1878. She worked to rejuvenate the church and establish it as a center of learning and culture and a forum for the discussion of social issues of the time, including women's suffrage. She invited Julia Ward Howe, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony to air their views from the pulpit. Under her ministry the women began to vote and hold offices in the church. After nine years of ministry, Brown left a thriving congregation and moved on to a new challenge. She left full-time ministry to become an activist for women's rights. For the next thirty-two years, she labored, spoke, and demonstrated on behalf of this cause.

In the fall of 1920, she returned to the Racine church and spoke about her life's work.

She spoke the familiar words we find in our hymnal Singing the Living Tradition, Reading 569:

Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals, which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world beautiful. Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message, that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost. Go on finding ever new applications of these truths and new enjoyments in their contemplation, always trusting in the one God which ever lives and loves.

Looking back on her career as a parish minister, Olympia Brown wrote: Those who may read this will think it strange that I could only find a field in run-down or comatose churches, but they must remember that the pulpits of all the prosperous churches were already occupied by men, and were looked forward to as the goal of all the young men coming into the ministry with whom I, at first the only woman preacher in the denomination, had to compete. All I could do was to take some place that had been abandoned by others and make something of it, and this I was only too glad to do.

Unitarian

Celia Burleigh.

In 1871, Celia Burleigh, a life-long activist and reformer, became minister of the Unitarian congregation in Brooklyn, Connecticut. This made her the first woman ever ordained in Connecticut and the first woman ordained in the Unitarian church.

Burleigh was born in Cazenovia, New York, in 1826, but there is relatively little information available about her childhood. After the failure of an early marriage, she lived in Syracuse where she taught, gave lectures on temperance and suffrage, and wrote articles for the Christian Register. On September 7, 1865, she married William Henry Burleigh, a reformer and publisher who, at the time, worked as a harbor master in New York City. With the support of her new husband, Celia Burleigh made a name for herself as a national leader in support of women's suffrage and the rights of children. In 1869 she helped organize the New-York-based Social Science Club, later renamed the Brooklyn Woman's Club, and became its first president. Burleigh also worked diligently to create the first women's business union. During this time, she frequently attended women's suffrage conventions, like the North-western Woman's Suffrage Association meeting in November of 1870. There, she took the platform alongside reformers such as Lillie Peckham and Susan B. Anthony.

In July of 1871, Celia received an invitation to become a summer minister in Brooklyn, Connecticut. Her husband William, who had died just four months earlier, had always encouraged Celia to be a minister, and although she had never preached before, she embraced the opportunity to have a weekly platform for delivering her message.

After finding a great deal of success preaching in Brooklyn in August of 1871, Burleigh accepted the church's invitation to stay and become their permanent minister. On October 5, 1871, she was ordained as a minister in the Unitarian Church. Her ordination was such a momentous occasion that Julia Ward Howe (author of "Battle Hymn of the Republic"), read a letter of support for Burleigh written by Henry Ward Beecher, arguably the most well-known minister in the country.

Burleigh's time as a minister in Brooklyn was brief but eventful. She kept a busy schedule preaching, furthering the cause of women's suffrage, and even took part in the ordination of Mary Hannah Graves, the second woman to be ordained by the church. Unfortunately, after just two years as minister of the First Ecclesiastical Society of Brooklyn, Burleigh had to resign when she developed breast cancer.

In hopes of reviving her health, Burleigh moved to Danville, New York, where the hospital worked to improve her condition with a water cure. She served the congregation in Danville during her 18 months there but then returned to Syracuse when the effects of her illness required additional care. Celia Burleigh died in Syracuse on July, 25, 1875, and her remains were sent back to Brooklyn for burial.

(In 1853, Antoinette Brown Blackwell was ordained by a church belonging to the Congregationalist Church. Her ordination was not recognized by the denomination. She later quit the church and became a Unitarian. In 1878, the American Unitarian Association recognized her as a minister.)

First African American UU Ministers

Universalist

Joseph Jordan (1842-1901), the first African American to be ordained as a minister by the Universalist denomination, founded the First Universalist Church of Norfolk, Virginia in 1887 and initiated an educational effort for African American children in Norfolk and vicinity. The missions and schools that were his legacy served thousands of children and families in eastern Virginia over the period of a century.

Joseph Jordan (pronounced "Jerden,"and sometimes mistakenly referred to as "Joseph H. Jordan" in published references) was born in June 1842 a free man in West Norfolk, Virginia, on the Elizabeth River a little downstream from the city of Norfolk, one of several children of Elizabeth Jordan. From an early age he took up the trade of oysterman, as did many other free Blacks of the time. When he was 21, he moved to Norfolk to seek greater opportunity. There he married Indianna Brown, also free-born. The couple had three children, only one of whom, Thaddeus, lived to maturity. Some years later Indianna left to go on her own, taking Thaddeus with her. The Jordans were divorced in 1890

Jordan several times changed occupations—becoming a laborer, a grocer, and finally a carpenter. As a carpenter he earned enough money to buy or build several houses in the Norfolk suburb of Huntersville. He was then able to live off the rent. Literate, skilled, and a property owner, Jordan was among the elite of his race and poised to become a leader in his community.

Jordan felt deeply about religion. By 1880 he had been ordained a Baptist minister. A few years later a Methodist colleague gave him Thomas Whittemore's The Plain Guide to Universalism, 1840, and asked him what he thought of it. The book made an immediate, powerful, and lasting impression on him. Whittemore's book explains the goodness of the universe, the loving parental guidance of the Almighty for all of humanity, and the promise of salvation for all. It is not known which passages particularly attracted Jordan, but Whittemore makes it clear that Universalism was not a religion for the bigoted, but for those who could accept that God's love is extended equally to all—the powerless and the powerful, the oppressed and their oppressors. By contrast the prevailing

attitude among Blacks in the 1880s, as subjugation and segregation became increasingly implanted in Southern society, was that white oppressors would surely suffer in hell. Jordan was ready to devour all he could find on Universalism. He soon added John Bovee Dods's sermons to his growing library on his new faith.

No longer able to preach the Baptist faith, Jordan continued to ply the carpenter's trade while he pondered what to do. In 1886 he went to Philadelphia, where he knew there was a significant community of Universalists, and called on Edwin C. Sweetser, minister of the Universalist Church of the Messiah. Jordan remained in Philadelphia seven months, studying and worshiping under Sweetser. Their mutual respect increased and approached friendship. Studying with Sweetser deepened Jordan's faith and led him to explore the theological writings of Universalist ministers Alonso Ames Miner and Thomas Baldwin Thayer, among others.

Returning to Norfolk, Jordan began to preach the Universalist faith to anyone who would listen. He rented a room at 42 Lincoln Street as a chapel, which shortly was packed with worshipers. Employing his skill as a carpenter, he fashioned a pulpit. He and his congregation of twenty families formally organized themselves as a Universalist mission on June 29, 1887. Yet parents increasingly came to the mission pleading for Jordan to establish a day school to help their children gain better opportunity in this world. Jordan agreed to do all he could to meet this urgently-pressed need, and do so within the Universalist church.

Jordan then asked Sweetser whether he could become a recognized Universalist minister. Sweetser referred the issue to the Universalist General Convention, which issued Jordan in 1888 a formal licence to preach for one year, a normal step toward ordination. The following year a Universalist Ordaining Council of three ministers (including Sweetser) and four lay persons met with Jordan in the Church of the Messiah to examine his fitness for the Universalist ministry. The council found him to have a "clear and bright mind" and to be "free alike from pretension and from abjectness." "He believes in us, and knows why" the council concluded, and his candidacy proved to be "exceedingly satisfactory." Upon unanimous recommendation, the next day—March 31, 1889—Jordan was ordained as a Universalist minister at a ceremony in the Church of the Messiah. The Universalist denomination had welcomed its first African American minister. The Rev. Joseph Jordan returned to Norfolk with crates of books and hopes that the Universalist faith would spread ever more widely in the African American communities of the South. The Universalist General Convention quickly admitted his church into fellowship. The Lincoln Street house soon bore a sign proclaiming "The First Universalist Church of Norfolk."

The rented chapel room was soon so crowded that a larger space was needed. The congregation was unable to afford a church of its own. In 1893 Jordan addressed the General Convention held in Washington, D.C. on the need to fund a building in Norfolk. Donations added up to \$2,758, enough to build a church and provide for some of its furnishings. The new building, containing a sanctuary and church school room, was dedicated in November 1894. It was located on Princess Anne Avenue in the heart of the black community of Norfolk. Sunday evening worship attracted up to 35 congregants. The church was occasionally attended by white Universalists, who were without a church of their own in Norfolk.

Jordan was pleased that the new building provided for a well-appointed day school to meet the needs of the educationally-denied black children of Norfolk. In his estimation church and education went hand-in-hand to help people live life with dignity, purpose, and effectiveness, and to empower them and their community. In the new building he and his assistants taught day school to 90-100 community children during the week.

Universalist missionary **Quillen Shinn** organized a chapter of the Young People's Christian Union in the church and envisioned great plans for expansion of the "mission to the Colored people." "No man can be a Universalist whose love did not take in all races and colors of men," Shinn proclaimed, adding that "if the glad [Universalist] message had been understood and obeyed, [Black people] would never have been slaves." Radical equality through mutual love and respect was a most challenging doctrine for the Jim Crow South of the time.

By 1900 day school attendance had settled down to an average of 50 pupils, served by a staff of three teachers. Desire for education by African American parents in Norfolk remained high. Despite other private and church-sponsored schools for Blacks, demand always outstripped

opportunity. Universalism as a faith, however, was radical in its social implications and debated in the local Black press. As a local institution, The Universalist church seemed a challenge to the established Black churches, and as a national institution, it was white and segregationist. Jordan's congregants tended to be from among the more independently-minded new residents of Norfolk, people who were attracted to the city from the rural South and were likely to move on to northern cities in search of greater opportunity. Regular subsidies by the Universalist General Convention kept the church open and the day school going. Nevertheless, while the day school remained strong, the congregation lost key lay people and withered.

In 1896 Jordan married Mary Elizabeth Clark, 27 years his junior, and a teacher in his school. Their son, born later that year, was named Richard Sweetser Jordan, in honor of Jordan's Universalist mentor. Joseph Jordan died on June 3, 1901, at age 53* of an unknown disease. The funeral was held in the church he had founded, his colleague and successor, <u>Thomas E. Wise</u>, officiating. Ministers from other Black churches attended, suspicion about the foreign and strange Universalist faith having somewhat lessened. The following year the young Richard Sweetser Jordan died of tuberculosis, and his mother of the same disease the year after that.

With the passing of his immediate family, proceeds from Jordan's estate went to the Universalist General Convention. These were used to support the growing Universalist mission in Suffolk, Virginia, a daughter mission created by the Norfolk church. Without steady leadership, the First Universalist Church of Norfolk and its day school declined and in 1906 were closed. Attempts over the next decade to revive a Norfolk congregation of African American Universalists failed. The church building that Jordan had lovingly built was sold and became a billiard parlor. Yet the Suffolk mission grew, prospered, and remained, until its close in 1984, a vital legacy of Joseph Jordan's calling to the Universalist faith and to his people.

It should be noted that Joseph Jordan was not a relative of Joseph Fletcher Jordan, the Universalist denomination's third African American minister, who in 1904 became minister of the Suffolk mission church and principal of its associated day school.

* Note: Upcoming BLUU symposium named after Jordan

Unitarian

Lewis Allen McGee (November 11, 1893 – October 10, 1979) was a Unitarian minister and activist, who was among the first African American ministers of the Unitarian church and was active in the Civil Rights Movement

The son of a former slave and Methodist Episcopal minister, Lewis Allen McGee was born in 1893 in Scranton, Pennsylvania. After attending the University of Pittsburgh and Payne Theological Seminary, he was ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in 1915 at the age of 22. He served as an Army chaplain from September, 26 1918-early 1919 during World War I. From 1943-1945, during World War II, McGee ministered as chaplain at the Battle of the Bulge. When the German Army launched its Ardennes offensive in December 1944, McGee was ministering to the 95th Engineer General Services Regiment, a black engineers' battalion in Bastogne, Luxembourg, Belgium. During his military career, McGee served as a Chairman in the American Legion and a Master in the Masonic Lodge.

Discharged from the military on December 21, 1945, McGee entered Meadville Lombard Theological School and received his doctoral degree in 1949, becoming one of the first African American ministers of the Unitarian church. His experience in an integrated Army led to his interest in creating an interracial congregation, and with his third wife Marcella Walker and her brother George Walker Jnr., he founded the interracial Free Religious Fellowship of the Unitarian Church in Chicago in 1947. McGee served as minister to a largely African American congregation from 1948 to 1953[[], with his experiences described in the chapter 'A Dream Pursued' in the book *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*[[]. In 1950, McGee was the President of the Chicago area Liberal Ministers' Association. A member of the American Humanist Association, McGee's theological career dealt with issues at the intersection of race and humanism, the belief in the ability and responsibility of human beings to lead personal lives of ethical fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity. Now named the All Souls Free Religious Fellowship, the church remains an active Unitarian Universalist congregation of colour

McGee went on to serve interracial Unitarian congregations in Springfield, Ohio and Los Angeles, Chico, Anaheim, and Pasadena, California. McGee retired in 1967 as a Minister Emeritus, granted to honor long and meritorious service to a congregation where the minister has given devoted and competent ministerial leadership. He died at Memorial Hospital in Pullman, Washington on October 10,1979 after a long illness, at the age of 85. The Meadville Lombard Theological School maintains the Lewis McGee Papers, a collection which includes sermons, orders of service, correspondence, church bulletins, and newspaper clippings

Sources: Dictionary of UU Biographies (<u>http://uudb.org/</u>) <u>UUA.org</u> and wikipedia