

Universalist Church Plaque Dedication Speech

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We are standing in front of the building that was built by the First Universalist Society of Decatur for use as their church. Before Lake Decatur was constructed; before the Staley Bears moved to Chicago, before there was a Lincoln Theatre, a Millikin University, or a Transfer House to move around; before there was Dreamland Lake or State Fairs were held at Fairview Park; before the current St. Patrick's and First Presbyterian Churches were built; long before Decatur had electric lights and telephones; before all of the other existing buildings in Downtown Decatur were erected; even before the Millikin Homestead and Governor Oglesby Mansion were occupied; even before Illinois Republicans nominated Abraham Lincoln for President just around the corner in the canvas covered Wig Wam; and before Lincoln and Douglas met in Bement in 1858 to agree to have a series of Senatorial Debates; before there was a Central Park and fountain — before all of these things, twenty- eight souls professed their faith to the radical Universalist philosophy that there was a loving and accepting God, and built their church on this site.

In 1854, the year the railroads came to Decatur, Rev. David P. Bunn left his Universalist congregation in Mount Pulaski and organized a congregation in Decatur that immediately built a one-story brick church here on East Prairie Street. When the membership grew, the members decided to remain at this location, but also to add commercial space to their facility. In 1876 the walls and “zigzagged top” façade of their new church were raised up, and at 10:30am on Sunday, June 4th, four Universalist ministers dedicated the new facility. The Rev. Dr. W.S. Balch of Elgin was brought in as a special speaker. Quoting Luke 21:33, he stated that “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.” Apparently he meant it literally as his sermon lasted well over an hour. He preached two more times that day, and each time appealed for money to pay off the building debt. A total of \$1,330 was raised that day.

In that summer of 1876, when the Chicago Cubs played their first professional season enroute to the league championship, and Col. George Armstrong Custer led his soldiers to slaughter at the Little Big Horn River, Decatur had a population of 14,000 people and 14 churches. The newly remodeled Universalist Church contained space for two businesses at street level, each 20 feet wide, 70 feet deep and 14 feet high. Between the stores was a stairway leading to the meeting room above. The church portion of this building was 40 feet wide and 60 feet long with walls 20 feet high. The rough brick interior walls were plastered, and they and the ceiling were painted in the fresco style and illuminated with gas lights. The floor was carpeted and the newspapers reported that the windows were “of stained glass, with beautiful and appropriate devices in the arch at the top.” The choir was seated upon an elevation in the rear of the church and the pews could accommodate 250 people. In a typical Universalist omission, the newspapers of the day said nothing about the altar or sacred appliances.

A decade later, on December 28, 1887, founding Pastor, David P. Bunn died. His body was brought to this church by his fellow Masons, led by his good friend Jerome Gorin (the man who consecrated the cornerstones at both the Illinois State Capitol and the Chicago Water Tower). At that time in 1887, the Decatur Universalist Society was pastored by husband and wife ministers and on this occasion, the Rev. Sophie Gibb (perhaps Decatur's first female minister) led the obsequies while the choir sang "Nearer My God to Thee." Rev. Bunn was buried in Greenwood Cemetery under a tombstone inscribed with the words, "A Pioneer of the Universalist Faith."

Even with revenue from the rental of commercial space, the Universalist Society could not meet expenses as the size of its congregation dwindled. In 1904 the Society sold this property and met at other locations until it faded from existence about 1914. While every other church and building of its era has either burned down or has been razed, for over 150 years this Universalist Church edifice has remained as a vital but ever changing part of Downtown Decatur.

In addition to being home to the Universalist Fellowship for 50 years, we believe this building at first housed Dr. R.L. Walston and his Surgical Institute; at various times while still a church, it housed the Pacific Express, Globe Express, Wells Fargo Express, and United States Express Company freight offices (the Pacific Company at one time being under the management of a "Mr. J. Edgar Osborne"); later the building was home to the Cash Penney Laundry, Mr. Rome B. Richmond, Watchmaker and later seller of "talking machines"; the Herman Roucher Tailor Shop; the Durfee Brothers Real Estate, Insurance and Mutual Home and Savings business, the R.W. Trotter Electric Company which in 1912 opened the "Princess Theatre", one of the four "electric theatres" in Decatur at that time.

Beginning in 1914, Mrs. Annie Greenburg moved her Men's Furnishings and Shoe Store to this location and the Shoe Store business was eventually run by brothers Jacob and Julius Greenberg until the start of World War II. After briefly serving as home to the Helen Grace Carr Bookshop, the Williams family took over the lower level and developed their Women's Fashion Shop, which existed until 1986. At some point after 1904 the upper level Church "audience" room was subdivided into 12 small sleeping rooms, and sometime after 1930, the original zigzag top façade was squared off into its current flat configuration.

In 1986, Y.S. Lee took over the women's fashion business and in 1996 Julie and Karin Fisher opened the Sweet Dreams Tea Room and Gourmet Chocolate Shop. A fire in the rear of the building on New Year's Eve, 1999 closed the building and opened debates about tearing down or restoring this historic structure. Fortunately Jim and Emmy Williams and Doug and Lea Stukins found a way to rehabilitate the existing structure. Today Jan Hooten has opened a women's clothing store on the lower level, while deluxe apartments above the store are available for rent, even to Unitarian Universalists, who by the way have always been noted for their "Pazazz!"

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Decatur wishes to thank the Williams and Stukins families for allowing them to place a commemorative plaque on this historic Decatur building.