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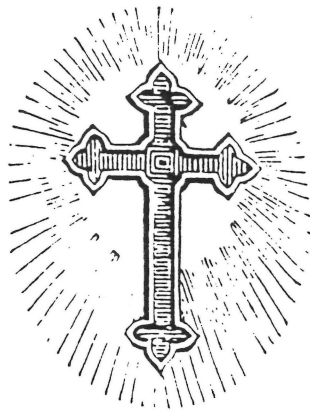
From The Indian Hill Historical Society



Buckingham Lodge
1861

The Universalist Society of Indian Hill

For at least several decades there was a Universalist Society in Indian Hill. Established in December, 1851, this group sought "more efficiency, better protection, and Greater Advancement in religious knowledge" according to signed documents.



Universalism incorporates many Christian elements and dates back to 130 A.D. when Greek Gnostics espoused the belief of universal salvation. Over the centuries, other church leaders endorsed this principle in Europe and North America. Americans trace the beginnings of the Universalist movement to deBenneville in Pennsylvania, Murray in Massachusetts, and Ballou in New England in the 1700's. Universalists differed from Christian "partialists," who believed that only a limited number would go to heaven, while the rest would go to hell. They believed that all souls would be saved by a benevolent, loving God. This liberal theology appealed to certain citizens. Jesus was the savior, and God was rational, loving, and redemptive. Sin was finite, and punishment was remedial, not vindictive.

Early Universalism was a theological movement within existing churches, but gradually purely Universalist churches sprang up. Their preachers either converted from more orthodox churches, or lay persons stepped forth to lead. Though different interpretations of theological positions were common, all agreed on a universal redemption. A loosely organized religion, Universalism had no one authoritative governing body, but general statements of Universalist beliefs were made between 1790 and 1899. On the frontier and in rural areas, Universalism was more evangelical.

Pioneer Settlers of the Lower Miami Valley states that the families of Perin, Durham, Armstrong, and Muchmore were "the first Universalists in the valley, and attended services with Rev. Waldo" in an old log schoolhouse as early as 1827. In 1842, the church was officially organized in Newtown. Meetings were in schools or homes until 1853, when the I.O.O.F. and the Universalists combined to build a church/hall in Newtown; and Rev. Quinby was the first pastor. The original trustees were Aquilla Durham, Artemus Day, and Jacob Thomas, with John H. Gerard serving on the building committee. By 1856 they reorganized, adopting the name "First Universalist Church of Newtown and Mt. Carmel".

Across the river (now Indian Hill) Universalists were definitely active before 1852 when they formally incorporated, noting that the minutes of their previous organization were lost. Trustees were Jacob Thomas, John Willson, and H. F. Armstrong. Whether Thomas was a Trustee both in Newtown and Indian Hill cannot be determined. The incorporation papers of 1852 for the Indian Hill Universalist Society were signed by 13 men other than the trustees, including 3 Armstrongs and 3 Norrises. The group evidently worshipped together past 1875 when they wrote a short constitution, signed by Trustees Jacob Thomas, Wm. Rothenhofer, and J. N. Gerard, Jr. (perhaps a relative of J. H. Gerard from Newtown).

Newtown and Indian Hill were both commercially and religiously intertwined. Residents of both communities used the Armstrong mills, and each community had ardent Universalists. Probably many relatives lived just across the Little Miami River from one another. Certainly similar names appear in the records from the Hill and from Newtown. Interestingly, five of the signatories of the 1852 Universalist Society are interred at Armstrong Chapel Cemetery (Wm. Armstrong, Hiram Norris, Elisha Norris, James Norris, and Wm. Rothenhofer).

Eventually the practicing Universalists died out or converted to other faiths. Exactly when remains an historical mystery, but their existence on the Hill and their common religious bond with Newtown is worth recognition.