

*UU Collegium, 2008***“Nineteenth-Century Universalist Evangelism: Connecticut to Texas, A Missionary Success Story”**

Rev. Dr. Barbara Coeyman  
 barbaracoeyman@comcast.net

**PREMISES OF THIS ESSAY**

I start with a few premises about the study of history in a religious context. First, history is spiritual practice. That is, knowing the history of those who came before us in Universalism and Unitarianism enhances our own modern faith experiences. Second, the persons and events that came before us can inform the present and shape the future. The past offers examples of both what to do and what not to do.

I have chosen this story of evangelism in Texas to illustrate successful evangelism that we today in liberal religion can learn from. This story also illustrates how individuals from the past can walk with us today in our various ministries. One of the Texas missionaries, Rev. Mary Billings, has become one of my ministerial muses, helping to mentor my ministry today across the decades since her death in 1904.

Universalism’s fundamental premises that humans are inherently good, and that all will be saved, was a welcome new theology in the early nineteenth-century in the United States. This new view of faith---the capacity to be religious without the threat of endless punishment---must have been comforting to Americans, of all economic and life situations. To experience this new religious mindset through reason and intellect, not through revivalist emotionalism that periodically swept through the country, added to the appeal of Universalism. Many wanted to spread their discovery of Universalism’s good news to others.

There were two main methods of disseminating the new gospel. One method was on a personal level, individual to individual, often preacher to listener, or lay leader to initiate, through more or less formal and informal means. Another method was institutional, through the creation of a denominational system not unlike orthodox denominations of the time: that is, through organizing congregations, associations, and conventions. Ultimately for American Universalism, the first method succeeded much more effectively than did the second. Universalism’s message appealed to many who heard about it, but the Universalist denomination as a structured system had many shortcomings. Overall, we could summarize the history of Universalism in the United States as a story of a good message organized within a relatively weak system. Overall, and especially during the first half of the nineteenth century, the need for effective leadership exceeded by far the availability of resources. Throughout his two-volume study, historian Russell Miller cites many examples of poor organizational support, especially during the denomination’s first century of existence.<sup>1</sup>

Many Universalists were committed to intentionally spreading the gospel and growing Universalist networks. They wanted to bring better ministry to existing Universalists and to introduce the faith to the uninitiated. They also came to realize the importance of intentional outreach, growth, and development. That intentional spreading of the gospel is the subject of Universalist Evangelism, what today we modern ‘evangelists’ label as ‘denominational outreach’ or ‘development.’

This study of the Texas missionary effort illustrates both the passion for Universalist theology among its ‘missionaries’ and the influence of organizational weaknesses. We focus on one state whose Universalist history has been little written about and even less studied. We also focus on

one missionary effort---the partnership of James and Mary Billings---placing their Texas evangelism in the context of their broader lives as Universalists. Their ministry illustrates how dynamic individuals can more-or-less single-handedly grow a movement---at least, one segment of it---and, sadly, how a movement can fall apart when its charismatic leaders are no longer present. The Billings' approach to mission work also illustrates the importance of support from established Universalists, especially in the northeast, to support evangelism in the west and south. Mary for one lived her first sixty years in Connecticut actively engaged in Universalist development, and the Connecticut-to-Texas networking she generated forms an important component of this story of success in Texas.

A brief word about my research methods and resulting contributions to our knowledge about Universalist history. Little has been written about the Billings and about Universalism in Texas. (Indeed, if anything, negative stereotyping prevails, that there could not be a history of liberal religion in a region of the country that is regarded---incorrectly---as so uniformly conservative in religious outlook today.) I rely on primary sources to the extent possible. I have examined all of the archival records from Texas preserved in the Andover Harvard archives, including the complete records of the Texas Universalist Convention, 1886-1930. I also draw from printed denominational sources, especially the *Universalist Register* (known by various names during the period of my study), the official statistical record of the Universalist denomination. I have also carefully examined several Universalist periodicals of the period: *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine*, *Gospel Banner*, *Universalist Herald*, *Christian* (later *Universalist*) *Leader*, *Ladies Repository*, and more.

## **OVERVIEW OF UNIVERSALIST ORGANIZATION, GROWTH, AND MISSION** <sup>ii</sup>

The Universalist gospel spread rapidly in the early nineteenth century. The Universalist message of goodness and salvation could not help but catch on. Disseminating the Universalist message and thus Universalist identity occurred through various structured and unstructured methods.

Just as in orthodox denominations, one could become a follower of Universalism by joining the Universalist 'system.' The local level of the system were congregations, identified variously as 'churches' or 'societies.' Congregations were led by ministers, with whom responsibility for explaining the new Universalist theology was largely invested. In most regions of the country, in turn there were Universalist structures beyond congregations. Most congregations and ministers participated in regional associations, which in turn were under the umbrella of State Conventions. This state level was the locus of organization and power in the movement. The national General Convention consisted of delegates from each state convention, but to regard the General Convention as more powerful than the states is to imply hierarchical structure that the Universalists never achieved.

Americans could also learn about Universalism quite apart from membership in the denominational system. Universalism appealed to rural populations and persons of lesser education and wealth. Circuit preachers were quite common, especially in small town and remote locations without regular ministry. Their appearances were rather hit-and-miss, not at all predictable nor repeatable. However, we should be careful to over-generalize that Unitarians largely were of the city and Universalists largely of the countryside, because there were Universalist congregation of significant size and influence in most major American cities in the nineteenth century as well.

Russell Miller reports that the peak of Universalist growth occurred 1820-1840. <sup>iii</sup> Already by mid-century, numbers in New England began to decline as the general American population moved westward and southward. Already by mid-century, complacency about growth had also settled in among many northeastern Universalists. On the other hand, Universalism grew in the

west and south, following the general growth of the American population.<sup>iv</sup> It is also not surprising that there were many reports about the different nature of the challenges of growing Universalism in the west and south compared to New England.<sup>v</sup>

Preachers in New England, although they sometimes think their labors are very hard, are little aware of the dangers, toils, and difficulties, through which the western preachers have to pass. Ours is comparatively an easy task to theirs. Men must love the gospel who endure such privations for the sake of preaching.<sup>vi</sup>

One fact common to Universalism, in connection with all the other prevalent forms of faith, is its fluctuating character. In this I mean that Universalism is fluctuating as to place, and not as to its general or aggregate condition. In its general results, Universalism in the west is marching forward with a degree of rapidity never known before, perhaps in its whole history. In this sense it knows no fluctuation. But as it respects particular places it fluctuates to an extent hardly known in New England. In any one particular place the cause may at one time seem to be in a flourishing condition. Regular preaching may be secured; large congregations may stately attend; and zeal and harmony may prevail among the, At another and succeeding time, all these circumstances may seem to be reversed. There is no longer regular preaching, congregations.<sup>vii</sup>

While we can be fairly sure about overall trends in growth, obtaining reliable data about membership size in the nineteenth century is uncertain at best. The circuit-riding nature of much Universalist evangelism contributes to the difficulty in reporting precise numbers. Without congregations to be part of, many might consider themselves Universalist without being part of any system in which their numbers counted. Many Universalists called for more accurate data keeping.<sup>viii</sup>

A spreadsheet that will be made available at the discussion section of this paper summarizes data from the *Universalist Register and Almanac* (name varies) from its founding in 1836 through 1904, the end of the period of this study of evangelism in Texas. The *Register* reports data about people, organizations, and institutions, including numbers of ministers, parishes, buildings, Sunday Schools, and more. Curiously, the *Register* is quite inconsistent in reporting data about number of members.<sup>ix</sup> This spreadsheet I have prepared also includes information about state conventions, and number of congregations, ministers, and church buildings or meeting houses reported in each state.<sup>x</sup> The spreadsheet also illustrates how Universalism developed first in New England. The New England-centric nature of the movement is evident simply by the method of reporting statistics until 1870: New England congregations were listed first, followed by congregations more or less in the order of the development of their state conventions. The *Register* did not begin to report data alphabetically by state until 1871.

### **Challenges to Intentional Universalist Evangelism**<sup>xi</sup>

Universalists were aware of the importance of intentional growth in numbers and in quality of congregations from the earliest days of the movement. That is, they realized the importance of evangelism. In spite of this awareness, there were many challenges to successful programs for intentional growth.

Denominationally, the Universalists initially resisted the creation of organized missionary movements. This was what the orthodox religions did to gain converts, as witnessed in the emotionally-charged revivalism that swept the country in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Universalism would not be a religion like that.<sup>xii</sup> Even after missionary efforts were underway in the 1840s and 1850s, there remained an ever-present tension between local congregations and support for national, and foreign efforts to grow the denomination.<sup>xiii</sup>

Thus, there was an everpresent need to remind, encourage, and perhaps cajole Universalists to remain faithful to building a movement, perhaps because of the highly personal appeal of the

theology. For instance, an anonymous reporter in 1865 issued advice that remains timely for modern congregations:

Many people do not seem to realize the importance of religious meetings to the community in which they live. Hence their efforts to support them are often entirely selfish. They give much of little according to their own pleasure in attending the same. If a man has no desire to attend church, or listen to the preaching of the gospel, he thinks he is excused for doing nothing to support such services. This is a mistake. His neighbors need them if he does not. Society is better for Sabbath meetings. The world would not be fit to live in with them. The Church is needed to educate the people as much as the school-house. The minister is needed as much as the school-master. All should feel its duty then to support religious meetings. We should relapse into barbarism without them. Civilization, refinement, education, and everything worth living for, goes with Christianity. keep up your religious meetings then---don't think of doing without the gospel. If you cannot have meetings every Sunday, have them half or one-fourth of the time. But have meetings and attend them.<sup>xiv</sup>

Another reporter in that same journal a few months later compared the spotty commitments of Universalists with the strong commitment of many of orthodox persuasion.

They (the orthodox) take much more pains to attend church to hear their partial faith expounded, than do our people to hear the glorious Gospel of the blessed God. They go by hundreds to hear damnation, while we go only by tens to hear salvation.... Brethren, this should not be.<sup>xv</sup>

Additionally, as early as the 1830s, there was an everpresent call for more resources for evangelism: for support of existing congregations and ministers; to revitalize areas of declining church growth; and to seed new regions not previously reached by the Universalist message. There was a pressing need for missionary outreach, which usually meant more ministers.<sup>xvi</sup>

Preachers are greatly wanted in the west as well as in the east. Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and even Oregon and California are sending forth their cry, come to out help, bring us the gospel.... The east is just as much in want according to its numbers. There has never been a time since John Murray landed in New Jersey when the east needed preachers of universal grace more than it needs them now.... (Re: the call for a minister to Iowa) We want a man of family, a man who is sound in the doctrine of Universalism, a good speaker, a sound theologian, a bold advocate of the truth, a practical Christian and a good working man.... We have eighteen members.... We can pay a good many from six hundred to one thousand dollars per annum.

The *Universalist Register* as early as 1838 reported that hundred of societies languished from want of efficient preaching.<sup>xvii</sup>

“There are hundreds of Societies that are languishing from the want of efficient measures to support preaching among them. Cannot something be done to establish circuit preaching on a permanent foundation? This subject is so important, and so intimately connected with the propensity of our cause, that we should suppose that neither laity nor clergy would fail to devise means, till the object was secured. Could something of this kind be done, it would be but a short time before the gospel banner would be unfurled in every village and hamlet. We hope another year will not pass, without something being done, and done to the purpose too, to supply destitute regions with the gospel.”

Most preachers were paid poorly, if paid at all, and often congregational organizing was a grass-roots effort. There were generally more congregations than ministers, many ministers serving part-time or as circuit-riders. Often, the denomination seemed to survived on ‘nothing at all except determination.’<sup>xviii</sup>

Fortunately, resistance to organized evangelism gradually subsided. The call for missionary outreach was first supported at the Associational level. For example, missionary efforts were initiated in Maine, and in 1839 the first Universalist Missionary Society was established in New

York.<sup>xix</sup> In 1846 Boston Universalists established a Missionary Society because growth in the greater Boston area was already beginning to slow. Even with these efforts, Universalists in the 1840s lamented that their General Convention was not supporting missionary efforts the way other denominations did.<sup>xx</sup> Finally a national Board of Missions was established in 1853 but then disbanded by 1859 for lack of activity, then reactivated in 1865 through the encouragement of the Indiana Convention, with \$100,000 committed to missionary work. Nevertheless, problems continued. State Conventions would not fulfill their pledges to support the national effort. There were disagreements about deciding criteria for funding. Some priorities focussed on ministerial students and developing congregations in the west, northwest, and south. The anticipated Centennial celebration of 1870 created the Murray Fund, with a goal of raising \$200,000 for the movement. Part of the Murray fund was designated for mission and outreach work.

After the Centennial, missionary efforts admittedly did improve. Mission work was both domestic, or ‘home,’ and foreign. ‘Home’ missions referred to locations both nearby and remote. For example, we will briefly examine missionary efforts in Connecticut, where towns not many miles from well-established Universalist societies and churches lacked a Universalist presence. In contrast, there was mission work in distant places like Texas, where ministers relocated and where there were few other Universalists who served as models for new congregations. There were also several foreign missions overseas. Within the period of this study, Universalists had effective presence in both Scotland and Japan. Missionary work was needed anywhere there were folks who had not yet heard the Universalist message of hope. Missionary success was measured by growth in congregations; the strengthening of organizational systems; and the greater acceptance of Universalism in the wider culture. The Texas story examined here should be considered among the nineteenth-century Universalist missionary success stories.

Mission and outreach continue to improve through a variety of measures. Many state conventions established state-based missionary organizations, that were more or less successful and more or less regular in their activities. These organizations usually had their own budgets and met in conjunction with the regular meetings of their respective state conventions. Many hired a state missionary, whose job included travel around the state, supply preaching, starting new congregations, and fund raising. We consider here **Charles Henry Webster** and **James Billings** as examples of state missionaries.

Additionally, Universalists took advantage of their prodigious publishing efforts to enhance mission work. Nineteenth-century Universalists were prolific writers and publishers. Their many weekly and monthly newspapers reported denominational activities, and literary and theological periodicals disseminated essays by writers in and out of the denomination.<sup>xxi</sup> With this publishing base, by the 1820s and 1830s, some Universalist publishers started to issue tracts: short documents that promoted particular themes and issues about Universalism, comparable to modern Unitarian Universalist pamphlets. In 1829, the publisher Thomas Whittemore challenged Universalists to increase their tract publications, to match other denominations. Tract societies sprang up, the first in 1840 by the Universalist society in Lowell, Massachusetts. Tracts were published by the Pennsylvania and Rhode Island conventions, and by 1845 New York had published a total of approximately 140,000 tracts. Tracts were less common in the west and south until after the Civil War. An average run was up to four thousand copies and pamphlets were on average four pages long and cost less than one cent. Tracts had the obvious advantage for missionary efforts that they could go where people could not go: the post office was an important aid to missionary outreach in less populated areas.

Universalist evangelists also faced external challenges. Universalists were a religion of ‘come-outers.’<sup>xxii</sup> Their inherent character as heretics brought confrontation from established orthodox religious groups, adding to the difficulty of their gaining a strong hold in many cities and towns. Some of these external challenges, such as debates about pros and cons of the various theological

positions, were fair and productive. Other challenges were decidedly unfair. Universalists were depicted as low on academic learning, or followers of weak theology or no theology, or being unfaithful citizens. Universalism enjoyed many converts from orthodox faiths, but even after converting, new Universalists were the objects of criticism. For example, a letter in the *Gospel Banner* July 26, 1888, tells of the censor a woman from a Methodist community endured in converting to Universalism. ‘So bitter and cruel is religious bigotry and intolerance and such are the obstacles that are in the way of an acceptance of a broader faith, that it requires the martyr’s spirit and courage to withstand it. No wonder that Universalism gains slowly.....’ In addition to spreading information about Universalism, tracts also countered anti-Universalist literature produced by adversaries of the denomination.

It is a testament to the power of Universalism’s theological principles that the Universalists as individuals and as a movement not only survived but thrived. This story of evangelism in Connecticut and Texas illustrates that strong will and courage.

## **TWO STATE UNIVERSALIST MOVEMENTS: CONNECTICUT AND TEXAS**

We begin our story of Texas evangelism in Connecticut to note some parallels and possible influences from Connecticut to Texas a half century later. Mary Billings lived in Connecticut through 1885. She discovered Universalism in Hartford in the 1830s at the height of denominational growth in the state. She worked tirelessly in a state with nominal Universalist presence in comparison with strongholds of New England Universalism such as Massachusetts and Maine. From 1869 to 1877, she was married to the Connecticut state missionary, Charles Henry Webster. Through that marriage, she undoubtedly learned much about evangelism. A steady decline through the 1880s in Connecticut’s Universalist movement, in numbers as well as in innovative thinking, may have been one of the factors prompting Mary to relocate to Texas, to a land more welcoming of her missionary zeal. In Texas, she probably continued to grow in her knowledge about and contributions to Universalist evangelism as the second wife of James Billings, the General Convention’s missionary to Texas 1883-1898. Mary gave much through her work as a minister, an administrator, and writer.<sup>xxiii</sup>

James Billings began his ministry in the 1830s in the Universalist stronghold of New York State. He served in several frontier areas of the midwest from the 1840s through the 1860s, and in the 1870s moved to the uncharted territory of Texas. While James certainly brought many Universalist experiences to Texas, it appears that Mary’s Connecticut connections may have been an even bigger influence on the shape of the Texas system. For instance, much of the funding for the Texas Convention came from Connecticut, and the structure of the Conventions in both states is similar.

I also pair Connecticut with Texas in this study of evangelism to illustrate the point that, while we may be more likely to accept the notion of missionary work in a ‘remote’ region like Texas, missionary outreach was also needed in areas where Universalism had had a long and strong hold such as in the heart of New England. Many parts of Connecticut had not heard of Universalism and did not enjoy the benefits of regular ministry and congregational life.

### **Universalism in Connecticut**

We start with a **quick history of Universalism in Connecticut.**<sup>xxiv</sup> Universalism caught on in Connecticut in the late eighteenth-century after the visits of preachers such as John Murray and Elhanan Winchester. Countering the stronghold of the Congregational church in the state (a challenge not faced by Massachusetts Universalists), by 1830 Universalism had found a grounding in virtually every part of Connecticut. Ten societies existed, along with five preachers

and three meeting houses. In eighteen other towns, there were significant groups of Universalists.<sup>xxv</sup> In the 1830s, three regional associations were formed and by 1833 there were thirty societies throughout the state. Repeatedly Connecticut Universalists were reminded to stay dedicated to their cause.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The **Connecticut Convention** was founded in 1832 and incorporated in 1862.<sup>xxvii</sup> Its mission was to be “devoted to the diffusion of knowledge of Christianity by publications and missionary measures.” The Convention was the keeper of the history and statistics of Universalism in the state. It also provided education about Universalism for children and adults; supported missionary work; and provided care for infirm ministers.<sup>xxviii</sup> Typifying other state conventions, the Connecticut Convention held annual meetings, documented by careful record keeping. Minutes of most state and associational conventions were published so that Universalists who did not attend could know about the work of the conventions. There was general agreement that state conventions acknowledged the ecclesiastical authority of the General Convention, and supported cooperation between state organizations and the national body. The various state conventions retained jurisdiction over clergy and Universalist organizations within the state.

In its early years, the Connecticut Convention seldom involved women in activities, at least not in activities that were reported in official minutes. However, after women achieved ordination in the 1860s and assumed Connecticut pulpits, their official presence in the convention becomes apparent. For example, Rev. Olympia Brown preached the occasional sermon at the Connecticut Convention in 1872, and Rev. Phebe Hanaford attended.

Although in a relatively small state, in the first half of the nineteenth century Universalism in Connecticut prospered, and ministers and lay leaders alike realized the importance of intentional **mission and outreach**. A home missionary society was established in the Hartford Universalist Church during the ministry of Rev. John Moore (1839-45). At the state level, a Connecticut Missionary Society was founded in 1853 to further the work of the Universalist church in Connecticut. Paralleling the organization and function of the State Convention, the Missionary Society held annual meetings attended by ministers and members from all churches. In 1853, for instance, the state Society posted a membership of 675. Often meetings were at the time of the annual State Convention, as were the meetings of other auxiliary groups such as the Connecticut Women’s Centenary Association and the Connecticut Sunday School Association. It had its own board and maintained its own budget.

The Society also hired its own agent, or missionary. In 1853, state missionary Rev. Abraham Norwood reported over 3000 miles of travel (in this small state).<sup>xxix</sup> Rev. Charles Henry Webster was named state missionary in 1867.<sup>xxx</sup> Webster had been involved in Connecticut’s outreach since moving to the state in 1861.<sup>xxxi</sup> In 1864 he was named as missionary in the Hartford Association. Chaplaincy service in the Civil War intervened. Returning to Connecticut, in 1867 Webster was hired as state missionary at a salary \$700 year. His duties included preparing sermons and supply preaching, collecting funds to support missionary efforts, and distributing the *Gospel Banner*. He left the state missionary position in 1869 on his second marriage, to Mary Grannis.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Connecticut Universalists welcomed financial donations. For example, in 1864 the Connecticut Department of the *Trumpet and Christian Freeman* noted the very generous donation of twenty-five dollars from P. T. Barnum. “This with many smaller gifts have sustained our Mission through the past year, and we look to the liberal Christians of Connecticut --- we mean those who have a liberal faith and a liberal heart --- to sustain us in our future labors.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> A year earlier, that same journal published an anonymous statement of gratitude for the many small contributions from citizens of the various small towns in the state, along with a statement of concern that in larger towns with larger congregations, there seemed to be much less commitment to intentional missionary outreach and financial giving.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

We note briefly the role of **women's missionary work** in Connecticut. Universalist Women Workers contributed much to the growth of the denomination.<sup>xxxv</sup> Through the nineteenth century, at congregational, associational, and state levels, various types of women's benevolent groups were active. One such group was the Women Universalist Missionary Society of Connecticut. In 1869, when the Women's Centenary Association (WCA) established state chapters, the Connecticut Missionary Society became the Connecticut state chapter of the WCA. State chapters supported the overall goals of the national WCA. Each state had its own officers. The state leader --- called a 'vice-president' --- in Connecticut was Mrs. Charles A. Skinner, wife of the minister of the Universalist Church in Hartford, the state's largest church. Mary Grannis Webster also served actively in the chapter. Participating in denominational efforts to raise money, in the first national WCA collection in 1869, thirteen thousand Connecticut women contributed to the cause.

## Universalism in Texas

### INTRODUCTION

Universalism existed in Connecticut for nearly a century by the time James Billings first visited Texas in the 1870s. Universalism's incursion into Texas is a compelling story of evangelism into unchartered territory, where this radical approach to religion made its way by virtue of the presence of individuals devoted to the cause and working largely independently of one another. That is, when James first visited Texas, there was no organized system supporting Universalism. The Billings' Texas story illustrates how committed, compassion, innovative individuals can successfully lead a missionary movement, even on limited resources, through a combination of a compelling theology and a mindset given to organization and growth. The Billings' Texas story can inspire outreach in modern Unitarian Universalism.

The story of Universalist evangelism in Texas starts long before James' first visited around 1875. Texas was one of several areas in the mid-nineteenth-century that enjoyed scattered Universalist circuit preaching by ministers from other parts of the country.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Before James arrival, Universalists in Texas had come together largely under the ministry of Marmaduke Gardner, but his leadership was not particularly intentional about growth.

James' exact reasons for visiting Texas for the first time are not clear. It seems likely that this ever-curious retired minister saw an opportunity to explore new lands and promote the Universalist gospel. What is clear is that, once in Texas, he found two compelling reasons to remain. The mission field was wide open, begging for competent ministers to spread the gospel. Additionally, the warm southern climate appealed to him and his ailing wife.

In his first phase of ministry in Texas, James Billings served as a volunteer itinerant missionary. In this role, he did not expect financial rewards. Instead, his reward was promulgating truth to 'starving people.' Already then he lamented the fact that the work was moving ahead so slowly because there of lack of sufficient funding.

After returning briefly to the northeast following the death of his wife in 1881, in 1883, at the age of seventy-two, James received an official appointment from the General Convention as Missionary to Texas. That appointment gave him access to denominational funding, the largest amounts of which came from the Women's Centenary Association (WCA), to be discussed further below. James pursued itinerant missionary work for the next three years, until he settled in the small cotton town of Hico in north-central Texas where he established the mission center for the state. New railway access in Hico served to distribute the town's cotton crop.

In an article in the *Gospel Banner* James looked back on his life. He noted all the changes that had occurred in the past several decades: in religious thought; in railway transportation; in telegraphs, telephones, and other communication; in the use of electricity; and more. He reflected that in 1837, the year he began his ministry in New York, Texas was not even part of the United States. It was remarkable even to him how much liberal faith had grown on the frontier.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Around the time James was establishing himself in Texas, Mary Webster was probably seeking new adventures. After her second husband died in 1877, Mary became increasingly involved in denominational activities. Simultaneously, perhaps ironically, Connecticut Universalism was waning. Even pioneering women ministers who came to Connecticut in the 1860s and 1870s --- especially Olympia Brown and Phebe Hanaford --- had moved on. Mary herself had many reasons to look beyond her home state. While she came from a large family with ties to Connecticut going back as far as the sixteenth-century, she herself was childless. She had no immediate family reasons to remain in Connecticut. She also had a life-long enjoyment of travel probably acquired from her father, and had traveled widely in the United States and Europe. As a devoted member of the Connecticut chapter of the WCA, Mary was also acquainted with the many mission projects Universalists were supporting, including the Texas mission since 1883. Her trip to Texas in 1885 to help mission work turned into a permanent re-location when she married James in a surprise ceremony in Waco, Texas, in March 1885. Eventually settling in Hico, she remained a resident of the Lone Star State through her death in 1904.

But why Texas? What was it like, this state of 275,000 square miles?<sup>xxxviii</sup> Texas reaped the benefits of a population explosion after the Civil War, especially of poor white populations from other parts of the south and the mid-west and of German immigrants. The state's population remained overwhelmingly rural---for example, 84% in 1890---in this economy dominated by cattle and cotton. However, the burgeoning railway system contributed to population growth as well as urbanization. In 1890 Dallas, with a population of 38,000, was the largest city in Texas. By the late nineteenth century, the state also had several colleges and women were visible in many areas of politics and reform work. Overall Texans were also deeply religious, ripe not only for orthodoxy but for the 'heretical' gospel of Universalism.<sup>xxxix</sup>

James and Mary settled happily in Texas. This move did not mean moving to the other end of the universe. They remained in constant contact with friends around the country and regularly submitted articles to major Universalist newspapers. One wonders how they wrote so much, in the days before computers and emailing. They also traveled constantly, not only around Texas on their mission circuits but to other parts of the country.

The Billings faced both internal and external challenges. It wasn't bad enough that the Universalist denomination did not offer better internal organizational support. There were also many external challenges from the culture. Ministers of other denominations --- Methodists, Baptists, Campbellites, and more --- challenged the principle of Universalism and those who stood for it. Often these challenges included public debates and published tracts.<sup>xi</sup> James frequently reported intolerance from ministers in the towns where he preached. He was even threatened with tarring and feathering.<sup>xii</sup> (CONV MINUTES)

While their lives were fully immersed in promoting Universalism, James functioned in two different capacities, with Mary as his assistant and sometime his co-partner in both roles. One of their roles was leadership of the Texas Universalist Convention, which met from 1886 to 1930. In the Convention, James served as President and in many other roles, and Mary held various offices, including corresponding secretary. As president, James organized and ran meetings and presided over the administration of Universalism in the state, much as a UUA district executive would today. This was James the administrator. In his other role as state Superintendent of Missions, James functioned as spiritual leader, devoted to spreading the Universalist gospel. He was assisted by various state evangelists. These roles required preaching, writing, disseminating

news about Texas in Universalist journals, articulating theological positions in published tracts and public debates, building congregations and meeting houses for congregations, promoting social action initiatives in communities, and more.(Conv notes p 23)

### TEXAS CONVENTION

The **Texas Universalist Convention** was perhaps most significant and enduring contribution James and Mary Billings made to Texas Universalism.<sup>xliii</sup> Establishing a State Convention meant that Texas Universalists had arrived at a certain level of credulity, as evidenced by the many ads about the conventions James placed in denominational newspapers around the country. The Texans met as an association from 1886 to 1889, when they announced their intention to form a State Convention and a State Church (in Hico). The location of their meetings rotated from year to year among the towns with the more active churches. [See HANDOUT #1 provided during discussion] Overall, these locations indicate a gradual geographical shift of Universalist concentration from the central eastern portion of Texas where the earlier churches were located, to the north-central portion of the state. Most conventions seem to have been scheduled in late summer or fall. In the early years, there were sometimes semi-annual meetings as well, but no official business was conducted during these meetings.

The official order of business of the Texas State Convention was laid out in its by-laws. This format paralleled that of the Connecticut State Convention, although to some extent there was a generic quality to the conventions from state to state. The Texas Convention meetings included divine services; a committee on credentials to verify delegates; appointments and business of other standing committees and committees for the session; reports of old and new business; ; planning for Sunday schools and other church organizations; and discussions of social justice resolutions such as temperance.<sup>xliiii</sup> (Conv Notes p. 24)

The following more detailed description of the convention schedule may offer a better impression of the flavor of the Conventions. The first statewide meeting, as an association, was in Meridian, in Bosque County, not far from Hico, 24-26 September 1886. One goal of this first meeting was to plan future work. The second state meeting, in 1887, was at First Unitarian Church on Main Street in Dallas. One hope was to establish a Universalist presence in this city. The convention was a success, but Universalism never took hold in Dallas. Also hailed as successful was the April, 1888 semi-annual meeting in Hico. The next meetings were held as follows: 1888 in Meridian; 1889 in Hico, when the new church was used for the first time; July 1890 in Meridian; and July 1891 in Comanche, one county west of Hico. In preparation for becoming a Convention, in 1890 the delegates adopted the first of several constitutions and by-laws (conv notes 22-24). These documents explain the structure, officers, operating procedure, and running of the mission system and the Convention.

The 1892 convention, at All Souls Church, Hico, was the first meeting as an official State Convention endorsed by the Universalist General Convention. (HANDOUT #2 for proceedings at a state convention, and a report from the Superintendent of Missions.)<sup>xliiv</sup> Delegates came from Waco, Cleburne, Hylton, and Belton. Seven new members joined the Texas convention, and Mary Billings was ordained to full ministry at that convention.<sup>xliv</sup> The 1893 convention was located at the Siloam congregation (Smith Springs) in Williamson County, the first time for this location. Siloam was a far trip for Hico residents, say the records, but ‘a good number’ attended from counties adjacent to Williamson County. Hico residents had an easy trip the next year, when the convention returned to All Souls Church in August, 1894. Seven preachers attended this largest state convention to that date. Five church members were added and six candidates were baptized.

Brother Quillen Shinn attended the fourth convention in Meridian in August, 1895, along with five other preachers and many delegates. In that same year, judge J. D. Barker replaced the aging James Billings as Texas Superintendent. C. H. Rogers, returning to Texas from Oklahoma, was

elected President at the fifth state convention in Grapeland, the most eastern of the convention sites to that date. This 1896 convention reported the largest gathering of Universalists ever at one convention: reportedly five hundred attended one worship service. The sixth convention was in Cleburne. James Billings, nearly deaf and blind by that point, was acknowledged as the convention's spiritual leader in Texas, but the convention records also acknowledge that the state was left in good hands under the leadership of Barker and Rogers. James submitted his final address in November 1898. (HANDOUT #3 for his final address). He died soon thereafter.

Following James' death, Mary Billings took over some duties of the State Superintendent and Corresponding Evangelist (at an annual salary of \$13!), and A. G. Strain and Rogers also served as State Evangelists. The eighth annual convention in 1899 returned to All Souls, Hico, in October 1899, with delegates from Waco, Cleburne, Lone Star, China Springs, Richland, Bowie, Meridian, and Merritt, along with five preachers. The meeting included six sermons and diverse convention business, as well as a memorial service for James Billings.

For the remainder of the Billings period annual conventions were held as follows: 1900 in Bowie, near the north central border with Oklahoma; 1901 in Hico; and 1902 at Enon. The 1903 meeting was canceled due to Mary's illness, and her death in 1904 interrupted annual meetings until 1907. Complicating matters further, in 1907 both Revs. Strain and J. W. Lawhon died, putting extra pressures on the church at Siloam.<sup>xlvi</sup> A note in the records of the convention of 1913 indicates how much the state conventions suffered after Mary's death: in the 'years following the passing of Rev. Mary Billings, our conventions were but a form, simply a loose being together, merely an effort to preserve our church identity without a continuous and concerted effort toward denominational efficiency.'<sup>xlvii</sup>

At nearly every meeting, Texas Universalists adopted resolutions on what today are referred to as 'social action' initiatives: including intemperance, war, the death penalty, cruelty to animals, and women's rights (See HANDOUT #4).<sup>xlviii</sup>

#### SUPERINTENDENT OF MISSIONS

As the **Texas Superintendent of Missions**, James had many responsibilities and survived many challenges. He documented his work in many written reports to the State Conventions and to Universalist magazines. These reports contain many appeals for missionary help, both financial and in personnel, and reflect his dedication to spreading Universalism in the state. Many reports also reveal his frustrations with a denomination that was organizationally weak and negligent in supporting its workers. He frequently published calls to ministers up north to come to Texas, to spread the gospel and to enjoy the warm climate. During his twelve years as state missionary, he worked long hours for low pay, remaining dedicated to his call to spread the Universalist gospel.<sup>xlix</sup>

To illustrate a small portion of his experiences at State Missionary, he began his official appointment in 1883 by returning to Texas through Galveston. He said then that he saw the potential for growth in Texas: it was ripe for his gospel. He wrote in May 1884 that he had never been any place where Universalism was as poorly represented as in Texas, and he took it on as one of his goals to improve the ministry, even though he knew he could not do everything by himself.<sup>i</sup> In May 1884, he reported that he moved around almost daily, preaching thirty or more sermons in the past month. In March 1886 his report in the *Gospel Banner* indicates he traveled from Iredell, twelve miles from Hico; to Meridian; to Moody and Galleen; to Coperas Cove and Goldthwaite and Blanket; to Comanche and Eastland Country where he stayed with friends from Georgia; to Alexander; and then the ten miles back to Hico, where he developed an acquaintance with the Methodist minister. In a sermon of July, 1889 he called for Universalists to continue to keep the truth as their goal, and lamented that the movement lacked for organization. Far more persons in Texas were believers than were connected with a church.<sup>ii</sup>

His final Convention report of 1898 suggests that he maintained his inordinate regime of work to the end. That report offers a picture of what might be a typical year in the life of a Universalist minister in his prime. That James was in his eighty-seventh year makes this not a typical but an extraordinary report. He had recently traveled to seventeen congregations, in spite of his ill-health. He reminded the Convention that through his ministry, he helped Texas reach financial security through establishing a permanent fund and growing the financial base for the state. (See HANDOUT #5)

#### RESULTS OF BILLINGS MINISTRY

Clearly Universalism in Texas experienced unparalleled growth under the leadership of James and Mary Billings. Manning's opinion that 'it was natural that the Universalist Church should grow because of rapid development of the state as railways expanded' aside, Universalism would not have expanded as rapidly as it did without the Billings' skilled leadership and their connections to funding sources.<sup>lii</sup> Before James began his official duties in 1883, the *Universalist Register* reported only two churches in the state, with membership totals under one hundred and only two or more part-time preachers. To James' credit, by 1887, eight new parishes, four Sunday Schools, and ten ministers were added to the state. By 1897 the number of congregations had risen to thirty-one and the membership to 620, with three Sunday Schools, seventy members, two church buildings, and three pieces of property. (see HANDOUT #6)

James sent at least twelve new ministers into the field, including some of the future leaders of the state convention such as Rev. J. K. Street, who served in Dallas and Fort Worth from 1885 to 1890; Rev. C. H. Rogers (a former Methodist, won over to Universalism in 1889);<sup>liii</sup> Rev. J. M. Wright, who started in 1887; and Rev. J. D. Barker, who was also a judge and is first named as a lay preacher in 1884. Barker served as Superintendent from 1895 until 1911, and is mentioned in Universalist correspondence at least as late as 1940.<sup>liv</sup>

After James' death, in 1899 Mary Billings reported that the state had twenty parishes with three buildings and that two more parishes were planned. The convention records of that year indicate that the number of Universalists in the state had jumped to two thousand, a number that is much higher than the numbers reported in the *Register* 1897, but Mary's numbers probably include the Universalist 'at-large' not associated with congregations.<sup>lv</sup> At the turn of the century, eleven churches were reported in records of the State Convention. These records also report that the existing preachers could not cover all the preaching desired throughout the state. Nevertheless, compared with the past, Universalists were 'making progress, and they hope for even greater progress in the future.'<sup>lvi</sup>

Additionally, James and Mary established several auxiliary organizations in the Texas Universalist convention, including Texas chapters of the Young People's Christian Union and the Universalist Women's Centenary Association.

#### MARY BILLINGS

As a woman missionary, **Mary Billings** broke many boundaries in Texas. She was ordained to ministry by the Texas Convention in 1892 at the age of sixty-eight, after over twenty years of service in both Connecticut and Texas that certainly was ministry before she acquired the mantle of 'minister.' She may have been the first woman from any denomination ordained to ministry in Texas.

She filled nearly every role in the Texas convention during her nearly twenty years of ministry. She helped develop Sunday Schools. She supported James as a circuit preacher throughout the state. She organized the Universalist women of Texas. Perhaps her biggest job was corresponding secretary for the state. That was not an easy job, as indicated by several descriptions in the convention records. One year she reported a salary of \$13.51. In 1902 she reported that her role was to correspond with members and send written reports to the

*Universalist Herald*, which was distributed weekly to nearly all Universalist homes in Texas. She also hoped to send the *Herald* to anyone inquiring about Universalism. She also distributed in person and through the mails other newspapers such as *Christian Leader* and *The Myrtle*, tracts, pamphlets, and leaflets. In one eight-month period, she sent about six hundred such publications and four hundred fifty letters and post cards. She realized these mailing might not substantially increase membership, but hoped they would ‘soften prejudice and liberalize the minds of many, who otherwise would continue in ignorance of our faith and hold false and unjust views.’<sup>lvii</sup>

The Andover-Harvard Archives includes a manuscript in Mary’s hand that appears to be an address book. Undated, it includes two different lists of towns in Texas (with county), followed by names of individuals who apparently received mailings from Mary. In the first, 156 towns are listed, in the second, 145 towns. The towns lay mostly in the eastern two-thirds of the state. The number of individuals in this list nears six hundred, the number Mary reported in 1902. Some towns had only one or two recipients, but other towns with well-established congregations included up to thirty recipients.<sup>lviii</sup>

To the credit of the Texas Universalists, Mary was not the only woman active in the movement. Rev. Rachel Dellgren came to Hico in 1898, where she married Osgood Billings, son of James, and was ordained to ministry. Marguerite Hess was minister in the town of Cleburne from 1911 to 1913. One Meekie Dunaway of Blanket seems to have served as a lay minister from 1886 to 1889 and was active again in 1908. And in nearby Arkansas, Rev. Athalia Irwin ministered to the Little Rock congregation from 1904 to 1907. Irwin had been mentored in ministry by Quillen Shinn.

#### HICO CHURCH

The Billings established the state church, All Soul, in Hico. Several record books of the congregation survive. They provides a profile of what congregational life in this prairie congregation was like. The books includes records of the pastors and lay deacons who served the church, the names of 272 church members who signed the book from 1886 through 1924, the names of the twenty-six who were baptized there, the locations of state conventions, and more. At the end of the 1890s, for example, membership in the congregation ran between fifty and sixty.<sup>lix</sup>

The congregation built their own building (HANDOUT #7). A report in the *Universalist Leader*, July, 1892 explains how a friend of James Billings from Illinois, Dr. Daniel Pingree, was settled in Hico. James visited Pingree first in March 1885. That contact may have been what motivated James and Mary to settle in Hico. In fact, they built their personal homestead near Pingree’s estate. The congregation first shared a schoolhouse with other congregations for worship services. Prior to the opening of the building in November, 1889, James traveled extensively up north to raise funds. The church was deeded to the General Convention, in trust for the denomination. It represented the greatest number of donations of any Universalist building in the country.

The church was built of wood, with a Texas pine interior and seats of maple. It included a raised chancel and the pulpit was a gift of S.Billings of Chicago, one of James’ sons. It also included an organ, and its silver communion service was given jointly by the WCA and friends in Hartford and Meriden. Measuring 28 X 48 feet, the capacity of the sanctuary was 250 people. The total building cost was \$2000 and the property, including the land, was valued at \$3000. The bell in the tower was cast in 1840 and was a gift from Universalists in Reading, PA, and their minister, the Rev. James Shrigley.<sup>lx</sup> Previously the bell was given to the Reading congregation by descendants of Dr. Benneville.<sup>lxi</sup> The building apparently was torn down within five years after Mary’s death in 1904. Where the congregation worshipped is unclear.

## THEOLOGY

Although relatively few documents can be identified as primarily theological in nature, James, Mary, and other Texas Universalists frequently expressed **their theological views** through printed materials. A sample of sermon topics and hymn texts recorded in the Texas Convention Minutes appears on HANDOUT #8.

For example, several sermons from both James and Mary were published in Universalist magazines. James often spoke about a God who is all love and all wise, all good and all powerful. He preached about endless hope for all creatures. His most extended theological statement appears in his 'Fraternal Letter' written to evangelical colleagues and published by the Universalist Publishing House in 1895.<sup>lxii</sup> In that letter he asserts how the orthodox belief in endless punishment is a justice issue. To suggest that a loving God would promote endless punishment would logically lead one to atheism: that is, there could be no god who would endlessly punish his people. James hoped to persuade his colleagues that truth will triumph over evil.

Universalists values appear in many other types of writings that are not theological *per se* but which suggest how Universalist theology pervaded all that James and Mary did. Mary was the more prolific writer. In literally hundreds of articles and congregational and denominational reports, as well as in her fictional writing and poetry, Mary expressed her Universalist theological views long before she considered herself a minister.

## FUNDING FOR TEXAS EVANGELISM: THE ROLE OF WOMEN WORKERS

Clearly the Billings needed financing to grow Universalism in Texas. Financing through official denominational channels was never enough. The Texas story illustrates how Universalists around the country offered support to dedicated missionaries like James and Mary Billings for a project in a land most of the contributors would never visit and knew little about. Support was in the form of both money and material objects, such as the bell that hung in the tower of the church in Hico.

They were helped considerably by personal friends and colleagues, 'on-site' in Texas and from the North, particularly Connecticut. It is likely that James and Mary also contributed their own resources. James' financial resources were probably not extravagant: he had, after all, lived his entire life as a minister, supplemented at times by work in publishing. Mary, on the other hand, may have brought a significant estate with her to the Texas frontier: she was well-provided for by her first husband, Hartford textile merchant Frederick Grannis, who died in 1866.<sup>lxiii</sup>

Minutes of meetings and articles in newspapers document their on-going appeal for funds. For example, in June 1887 James indicated that he needed Sunday School books to supply the churches in Hico and Meridien. In September 1888, he called for a permanent fund for missionary operations for Texas. The *Gospel Banner* of January 10, 1889 reports James' trip east to promote the Texas mission, when he met many good friends of Universalism as well as supportive ministers. He traveled as far as New York City, where he attended a meeting of the Universalist Club. The group was so impressed by his account of the trials and challenges of a southern missionary that they voted on the spot to give him \$100. He returned to Texas via Chicago, where he attended the General Convention and came away with subscriptions totalling \$1500 for the new building in Hico. A few months later, in May, 1889, the *Universalist Herald* reported that Mrs. Goddard, donor of the Goddard Seminary, would donate \$100 for the first Universalist church building in Texas.

## THE ROLE OF THE WOMEN'S CENTENARY ASSOCIATION <sup>lxiv</sup>

Universalism would not have grown as it did without the support of the women: through their commitment to social justice and reform, their capacity to raise funds, and their willingness to think radically to move this denomination along in spiritual as well as financial development.

Women and their work in Universalism had been recognized throughout the nineteenth century. Historical documents hardly ever suggest a sense of discrimination against the work of the women. The basic theology of Universalist salvation and goodness for all carried over into respect for the work of both men and women. Generally, however, up to the period of the Civil War, the principle of 'separate spheres' for men and women prevailed even in Universalism. That is, as in the general American culture, Universalists understood that men and women had different roles, different work to do, different callings. Women's spheres were in the home, and in that place, women were thus responsible for the moral development of their families and, by extension, of congregational life and the broader culture as well. Women did much that today would be called 'ministry,' but back then it carried other names and was realized in other formats. For example, American women of varied denominations supported missionary outreach as far back as the eighteenth century. Their outreach included external support for congregations and benevolent work for the well-being of society. Further, women did much to articulate Universalist theology before the Civil War, but they did so in formats not generally recognized as 'theological.' Many Universalist women were prolific writers in genres considered appropriate for women's sphere: short stories, poetry, and hymn texts.<sup>lxv</sup> Finally, while women seem to have been deeply involved in congregational life in most societies and parishes, they do not appear to have held offices of leadership in the first half of the century. Similarly, while they seem to have participated in denominational activities, they seldom engaged in work that merited documenting in official minutes and other records.

The decade of the 1860s marked significant changes in the role of women in the denomination. For one, women were achieving ministerial status: Lydia Jenkins in 1858, Olympia Brown and Augusta Chapin in 1863, Phebe Hanaford in 1868, to name a few. For another, women heard the call for fund-raising as part of the centennial celebration. Perhaps grounded in some new sense of liberation, they responded nobly by raising significant monies.

By the end of the 1860s, women rallied to help the General Convention reach the \$200,000 goal for the John Murray Centennial Fund. Believing it was women's work to further the cause of Universalism, at the 1869 meeting in Buffalo, they created the Women's Centenary Aid Association. They met their goal of \$35,000 from the 13,000 women who donated from \$1 to \$300. At their meeting in Gloucester in September, 1870, they decided not to disband after raising their goal because of technical difficulties, and by the meeting in Philadelphia in 1871, they decided to reorganize on a permanent basis and call themselves the Women's Centenary Association of the United States. They became an independent organization, with their own treasure, executive board, and control of their money.

Mary C. Webster became the first vice president of the WCA in Connecticut in 1869. Nearly eight hundred women in Connecticut subscribed to that first call for contributions. Indicative of Mary's personal financial status, she often contributed up to \$25, the same amount that received notice in the press when donated by P.T. Barnum. In a report of September 15, 1873, Mary wrote that from the 'work of our women will become a power in the denomination far more effective in good results than the most enthusiastic advocates of the so-called Women's Rights could have imagined.'

Texas established a WCA chapter as early as 1874, as indicated by the regular, although small, contributions received from the Lone Star State. Ironically, in 1881 the vice president for Texas is 'Mrs. Billings,' that is, James' first wife.,

FUNDING FOR TEXAS

The WCA first supported the Texas mission in 1883, making it possible for James Billings to return to the state to continue the same missionary work he had begun as a volunteer a few years earlier. Texas seems to have been the first state-level mission program funded by the WCA. Between 1883 and 1896, James received an annual salary starting at \$100 and growing to an annual total of \$250. Usually payments appeared quarterly. A comparison with other funding suggests the relative significance of the Texas mission. In 1884 the WCA awarded Caroline Soule a salary of \$250 and the Scottish mission a stipend of \$400. In 1889 the mission to Japan received \$100 a year for five years. In 1887 the WCA also supported missions in Florida, California and Canada.

The Texas mission was also supported by a variety of special gifts administered through the WCA: in 1886, \$16.05 from a donor in Pennsylvania; in 1887, 1888, and 1891, donations from Connecticut ranging from \$22 to \$43; and in 1892 a contribution of \$20 from the Connecticut State Convention. In the *Gospel Banner* of Oct 13, 1887, the Billings thanked the WCA's Connecticut chapter for a gift of \$31, which would pay for damage from recent flooding. In the *Gospel Banner* of October 17, 1889, the Billings thanked the Connecticut Convention, the WCA in the state, and an unidentified individual, who had sent them a total of \$50 for the Hico church. That contribution helped finish the interior of the church and was an encouraging token of interest and support for their work. Mary said in a report to the national WCA around 1894 that the Texas mission would be a failure without the aid of the organization.

The Massachusetts chapter of the WCA took the name 'Massachusetts Universalist Women's Association.' This group was perhaps the most successful of the state chapters, although it did not become a member organization of the national WCA until 1901. In 1886, it had nearly eight thousand members from 116 parishes.<sup>lxvi</sup> From 1891 through 1895, the group sent Mary \$50 annually, and from 1896-1904, they increased the amount to \$100 annually. For perspective, in these same years, funds were also given to Booker T. Washington for students at Tuskegee Institute; \$100 was sent annually to a congregation in Pomona, CA; and \$200 was sent annually to the Japanese mission. A note in their records in 1889 indicated that because the Hico church in its original charter was deeded to the WCA, all funds from Massachusetts were to be sent to Mary rather than James, since this is a women's organization. In an early version of her last will and testament, Mary indicated that she would leave her papers to the Massachusetts organization, but the final version of the will does not contain this provision.

Funding for the Texas mission from both the national and state organizations stopped in 1904 with the death of Mary Billings, illustrating how central to the success of the state were James and Mary's leadership.

## CONCLUSIONS ABOUT TEXAS EVANGELISM

Unfortunately, without James' leadership, by the time of Mary's death in 1904, the number of congregations had declined to eight. There were four unused churches around the state, but no funds to hire new preachers. Mary's illness in 1903 prompted the cancellation of the convention that year. Her death the following year at the age of eighty was a tremendous blow to Texas Universalism and for three years the very survival of the state organization was seriously jeopardized. There were no conventions or conferences during those three years, and only occasional circuit preaching. The convention records of 1904 indicate that 'the passing of Rev. Mary Billings on 31 March 1904 was almost a death blow to our cause in the state.' With the passing of Mary, Texas Universalism entered a slump, returning to the loose organization and lower membership it had known before 1886. It also appears that the congregation in Hico disbanded by 1906, or was at least reformulated into some sort of 'state church' of unspecified constitution.<sup>lxvii</sup> Based on plans of the town drawn up for fire insurance purposes, the building

seems to have been torn down by 1907 or 1908. The Universalist church resolved that it 'suffered an almost irreparable loss in the passing away of our much beloved sister, Rev. Mary Billings.'<sup>lxviii</sup> That year the church also lost other leaders: the Revs. Rogers and Strain left Texas for more promising preaching in other states.

While James and Mary Billings did much to grow the faith in the state and to establish a greater sense of professionalism in Universalism, ministry remained very much part-time, if not in time spent, at least in salaries. The Billings commented over and over in official records about their scanty incomes from these congregations populated mostly by poor, rural folks.<sup>lxix</sup> Other ministers fared similarly. In 1898, Rev. Strain reported a salary of \$125 and in the following year he received \$240 for 7378 miles of travel, 163 sermons, and recruiting twenty-three new members.<sup>lxx</sup> By 1900, Brother Strain as State Missionary earned \$400, for 9853 miles, 197 sermons, and three public discussions. Finances were tight. Said Strain, 'The little organizations are anxious to have regular monthly preaching, but (they are) generally lacking financial strength to support the same.'<sup>lxxi</sup> In fact, well into the twentieth century, Universalist preaching in the Southwest may have been in effect an activity for spare or leisure time, not a specialized professional endeavor.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup>Russell Miller, *The Larger Hope* (Boston, 1979). Volume 1 covers the denominations first century, 1770-1870.

<sup>ii</sup>Miller, *Larger Hope*, Ch. 8: "The Prominent Heresy of Our Time," 159-79, is a good overview of growth in Universalism to 1870. See also Charles Howe, *The Larger Faith* (Boston, 1993), 33-46.

<sup>iii</sup>Miller, *Larger Hope*, 161-62. To sample some of the data Miller cites. In 1820, there were 200 Universalist churches, fifty more than Unitarians, but meager compared to the 2700 that Presbyterians and Methodists together claimed. A report in 1832 suggested that Universalists were the fifth or sixth largest denomination in the United States, a claim which Miller treats with suspicion, as do I.

<sup>iv</sup>"Where the West Is," *Christian Leader*, August 14, 1869. This article points out that Chicago, which lies only 900 miles from the Atlantic and 2350 from the Pacific, is no longer considered a western but an eastern city. The opening of railways into the west accounted in part for the shift of geographic center of the country westward.

<sup>v</sup>Howe, *Larger Faith*, 48 ff.

<sup>vi</sup>*Trumpet*, 1848-49.

<sup>vii</sup>"Universalism in the West," *Trumpet*, 1849-50.

<sup>viii</sup>For example, the *Universalist Register* of 1854 (that year titled *Universalist Companion, with an Almanac and Register*) reported that "there is a decrease in our list of preachers from last year, owing mainly to a more rigid pruning in the Southern States. But death, also, has been unusually busy in our ranks within the past few years! It is much desired that we could have a careful and just pruning in our enumeration of Societies and houses of worship. We cannot but believe that in many States the number is overstated at the present time." (p. 55)

<sup>ix</sup> ??? See historical articles about fluidity in numbers, awareness of which existed back then.

<sup>x</sup>Miller, *Larger Hope*, 159. Miller's view is that problems of record-keeping persisted throughout the nineteenth century. Records were never complete nor accurate. It was only in 1834 there was a concerted effort to keep statistics, encouraged by the state conventions existing at that time, resulting in the publication of the *Register* starting in 1836.

<sup>xi</sup>Miller, *Larger Hope*, Chapter 12, "Extending Denominational Activities."

<sup>xii</sup>Miller, *Larger Hope*, 266-75, "Anti-Revivalism."

<sup>xiii</sup>Miller, *Larger Hope*, 263, cites a report from the 1867 General Convention: "So long as every State and Society are active in starting their own little local enterprises by themselves, and insist upon them to the entire exclusion of a centralized and general work by the head of the denomination, or, what should be the head, the General Convention, so long will our denomination possess no power or strength as a united National Organization."

<sup>xiv</sup>*Universalist*, April 15, 1865.

<sup>xv</sup>*Universalist*, July 15, 1865.

<sup>xvi</sup>Miller, *Larger Hope*, 254; *Trumpet*, January 21, 1856.

<sup>xvii</sup>*Universalist Register*, 1838, 30.

<sup>xviii</sup>Miller, *Larger Hope*, 264.

<sup>xix</sup>Miller, *Larger Hope*, 254.

<sup>xx</sup>Miller, *Larger Hope*, 258.

<sup>xxi</sup>Miller, *Larger Hope*, 285-319; Howe, *Larger Faith*, 39-40. I have not found analysis of how Universalist publishing overall compared with publishing in other nineteenth-century American denominations. If other denominations did publish more than the Universalists, then religious publishing in that period must have been great.

<sup>xxii</sup>Miller, *Larger Hope*, 167-79.

<sup>xxiii</sup>For a much more detail account of Mary's life, see Barbara Coeyman, *The Life and Work of Mary Ward Grannis Webster Billings*, research and writing in progress. Also, see "Mary Billings," in *Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography*, as well as "James Billings" and "Charles Henry Webster," *DUUB*, manuscript version.

<sup>xxiv</sup>Watt, *A Heresy of Truth*, offers a good history of Universalism in Hartford, and by extension in Connecticut. There is also a 19th-century perspective on Connecticut Universalist history, 'History of Universalism in Connecticut,' in *Universalist*, Oct. 19, 1864.

<sup>xxv</sup> Watt, *From Heresy*, 56ff.

<sup>xxvi</sup> For example, see *Universalist*, July 18, 1865. "There is no faith worth one half as much as ours.... And yet, how much less we do to support and extend this most blessed faith, then others do to support and extend their partial, cruel, and sorrow-producing faith. They pay more to build churches and support preaching, give liberally to send missionaries to heathen lands, and to build schools and colleges. They take much more pains to attend church to hear their partial faith expounded, than do our people to hear the glorious gospel of the blessed God. They go by hundreds to hear damnation, while we go only by tens to hear salvation.

<sup>xxvii</sup>Watt, *From Heresy*, 56ff.

<sup>xxviii</sup> For an example of a Convention report, see *Universalist*, Sept 24, 1864. "Our late Convention held in the beautiful town of Meriden was one to be remembered by all who were so fortunate as to be present. It was the largest public meeting we have attended in this state and we trust it is an indicator of an increase of interest in our holy work. It is certainly very encouraging to have so large and so earnest a meeting in the midst of a presidential campaign, and of a great internal war. We look upon it as a harbinger of better things to come and are thus inspired with new courage. ... "

<sup>xxix</sup>Miller, *Larger Hope*, 256-57. *Trumpet and Christian Freeman*, Sept 27, 1862.

<sup>xxx</sup>Barbara Coeyman, "Charles Henry Webster," draft article for *Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography*.

<sup>xxxi</sup> He was active in the state convention: for instance, offering prayer at the annual meeting in 1862, preaching the occasional sermon in 1864.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Mary Grannis was the future Mary Billings. Before her marriage to Webster, she was married to Frederick Grannis from 1845 to 1866. Mary's marriage to Webster probably contributed much to her acquiring the missionary zeal that she demonstrated in Texas during her marriage to James Billings.

<sup>xxxiii</sup>*Trumpet and Christian Freeman*, Jan. 30, 1864.

<sup>xxxiv</sup>*Trumpet and Christian Freeman*. Feb. 21, 1863. "We wish we could impress upon the minds of all the Universalists in the state, the importance of sustaining this society and of making it more efficient for good. It has many excellent friends and patrons in different parts of the state, whose charities and labors will long be remembered of man, and blessed of God. In some towns almost every Universalist, both male and female, is a member of the state missionary society and pays cheerfully a small annual sum to support the same. Upon these small sums depends mostly our means of sending the gospel into the by-places of our state. .... But in some of our large towns, where we have many and able believers, no interest has ever been taken in the missionary cause, and no money contributed....The missionary is not idle, he preaches every Sunday and some evenings, and would be glad to preach three or four times in each week. Brethren will you not join in the effort to build up our cause in this state? As a denomination we do not praise our religious faith as we ought. It cost many of us so little that we do not value it ... We owe it to our fathers."

<sup>xxxv</sup>In naming the women 'workers,' I reference an important publication about women, E.R. Hanson's *Our Women Workers*, Chicago, 1884.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> *Trumpet*, January 21, 1856. "Paansers are greatly wanted in the west as well as in the east. Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and even Oregon and California are sending forth their cry, come to out help, bring us the gospel.... The east is just as much in want according to its numbers. There has never been a time since John Murray landed in New Jersey when the east needed preachers of universal grace more than it needs them now.... (Re: the call for a minister to Iowa) We want a man of family, a man who is sound in the doctrine of Universalism, a good speaker, a sound theologian, a bold advocate of the truth, a practical Christian and a good working man.... We have eighteen members.... We can pay a good many from six hundred to one thousand dollars per annum."

<sup>xxxvii</sup> *Gospel Banner*, August 25, 1892.

<sup>xxxviii</sup>See more discussion of Texas in Barbara Coeyman, "The Life and Works of Mary Charlotte Ward Grannis Webster Billings," UU Collegium report, Oct. 23-26, 2003, sect. II, 6-7.

<sup>xxxix</sup>*Christian Leader*. "It may seem strange to our northern friends who have been brought up and have always lived in a land of Puritan habits and ideas, to hear that this state of cowboys and Texas rangers is wide awake on the great moral reform of prohibition."

<sup>xl</sup>The Campbellites were followers of Thomas Campbell. Today this movement is known generally as Disciplines of Christ.

<sup>xli</sup>*Universalist Herald*, Aug. 1, 1888. Reading 34.

<sup>xlii</sup>Detailed records of the Texas State Convention 1886-1929 are found in the Andover-Harvard Archives, bms 323/1 and bms 278/1 (1).

<sup>xliii</sup>During the first decade or so of meetings, the program also included several hymns written by Mary Billings. The texts of many survive in the official convention minutes..

<sup>xliiv</sup>See Handout A.

<sup>xliv</sup>Harvard Ms 323/1 (1).

<sup>xlvi</sup>Harvard Ms. 323/1 (1), 209.

<sup>xlvii</sup>Harvard Ms. 323/1 (1), 273.

<sup>xlviii</sup>For example, see an article 'Justice and Love,' in the *Gospel Banner* of February 19, 1885 for an example of his advocacy for prison reform.

<sup>xlix</sup>See articles in *Christian Leader*, May 26, 1887; also *Gospel Banner*, Sept. 13, 1888: I believe that Texas is the first southern state to set the ball in motion to raise a permanent fund for missionary operations. Ever since I came to this state in this capacity I have been talking of the necessary of doing something to build upon, that we must lay the cornerstone by having a fund. ... Last April our State Association blocked out a plan to start with. We take a written obligation for the amount each individual feels able to pay, running five years, drawing ten per cent, per annum, the principle to be loaned, and the interest used annually as the association may direct....I have obtained \$2000 in a small portion of the state. If I could canvass the whole state, we could keep two faithful missionaries at work, and settle two or three ministers in our most prominent cities, provided they would work as cheap as I am doing. .... What do you think of taking a vacation one or two months in Texas, preaching from 4 to 8 times a week, talking and pleading with the people to raise this fund, and get home with only \$5 of (profit)... rest a few days, start again and come home that much out of pocket, yet thankful that in the two trips you are even, minus wear and tear of clothes and weariness of body?

This is the way the master sent out his missionaries. Are we better than they? They were scourged and imprisoned. I have been stoned, threatened to be hung, tar and feathers, and the tar set on fire. What matters it? The gospel must be proclaimed to the poor---those who are so poor in the spirit of God's love as to throw stones and threaten with violence. May the good father forgive all such, is our sincere prayer.

<sup>i</sup>*Gospel Banner*, May 29, 1884: I have started on my second years work in the Lone Star. Of late I have visited many places where our faith has never been correctly represented. In fact I never have found any section where the ministers were as ignorant as many I meet here. We are represented and are believed to be the rankest of skeptics and unbelievers in Christianity. The ministers tell this often and the people believe it. And, to keep the people in this ignorance they are advised to not read to go and hear for themselves. Yet there are thousands who will read and hear. The chains of bigotry are not so tightly riveted but some will try to think and reason to see whether these things are so. It is astonishing how (empty) of apprehension and how ignorant some of the eminent divines are upon plain logical truths.

<sup>ii</sup>*Universalist Herald*, July 1, 1889: The great work of the denomination has been like lifting a new continent out of the mirey clay of creeds. The labor has not been in vain.... For the last century, the great conflict has been a God of revenge or a God of Love, with the Orthodox. And with the skeptic, no God, or the Infinite God and Father of the human family. This same conflict is upon us here in Texas. There we are more engaged in establishing principles than in gaining numbers. This is one principle reason why we are distanced in the race of numbers. Others are distanced in truth....

Universalism comes in to save the faith of humanity. There is our grand Mission to present a God that people can love, admire and worship.... We are sowing the good seed.... If we can create a spiritual feeling of love for the truth, we will be in the line of duty and in the end enjoy the fullness of our faith.... As to the appearance of our church, it consists in our lack of organization. The seed has been sown, broadcast. But thousands of believers in our faith are connected with no church. Not so with other sects. We find on all hands what we call organized error, and it will distance unorganized truth, every time....

Brethren, I firmly believe that we have a grand future before us for a noble harvest here in Texas. We used more of the spiritual infusion of the love of Christ in our hearts. We have faith that we need not be ashamed of. As

our Christian opposers hope for its truth, we have no apologies to make, unless it be that our faith and doctrine are better than out lives...

<sup>lii</sup>Manning, *Universalist*, 12.

<sup>liii</sup>Manning, *Universalist*, 13, 16. Rogers eventually left Texas, but returned to the state from Oklahoma in 1907 to become pastor at Hico following Mary's death.

<sup>liv</sup>Some records indicate that during these first years of James's tenure, J. K. Street also tried to organize a church in Dallas in 1887 and then in Fort Worth, but that neither were successful, perhaps because of the city environment. Street then moved to Waco, where he preached and joined the debating circuit.

<sup>lv</sup>Harvard Ms. 323/1 (1), p. 160.

<sup>lvi</sup>Harvard Ms. 323/1 (1), p. 46.

<sup>lvii</sup>Harvard Ms. 323/1 (1), Aug. 13, 1902, 190.

<sup>lviii</sup>I have also found a personal address book of Mary's, which contained hundreds of entries. She clearly had many connections throughout the country, and must have been a dedicated correspondent in her personal life as well as in her work for the church.

<sup>lix</sup>Andover-Harvard Archives, bMS 323/1 (3).

<sup>lx</sup>*Gospel Banner*, Oct. 17, 1889.

<sup>lxi</sup>*Universalist Herald*, Dec. 1, 1889.

<sup>lxii</sup>James Billings, *An Open Fraternal letter to the So-Called Evangelical Ministers of Texas*, Universalist Publishing House, 1895. Also, Readings 31 and 33.

<sup>lxiii</sup>That Mary lived quite comfortably during her first marriage is clear. The couple occupied a large home in West Hartford; they enjoyed nearly a year of travel in Europe around 1860; Mary's documented donations to Universalist causes were usually quite large; etc.

<sup>lxiv</sup>Russell Miller, *The Larger Hope: The Second Century of the Universalist Church in America, 1870-1970*, Ch. 21: "The Association of Universalist Women," 379-99; Ida Folsom, ed, rev. Ellen Spencer, *A Brief History of the Work of Universalist Women, 1869 to 1955*, Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, 1993.

<sup>lxv</sup>Comment about Mary Billings as author.

<sup>lxvi</sup>Miller, *Larger Hope*, 382.

<sup>lxvii</sup>Andover-Harvard bMS 323/1 (1).

<sup>lxviii</sup>Harvard Ms 323/1 (1), p. 196.

<sup>lxix</sup>They must have had personal income to supplement the church wages, possibly retirement funds from James, and family money from Mary.

<sup>lxx</sup>Manning, *Universalist*, 14.

<sup>lxxi</sup>Manning, *Universalist*, 14-15.

