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**Benjamin Bakewell and the Arrival of
Unitarianism in Pittsburgh**

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Unitarianism did not have a natural home in Pittsburgh. The western reaches of the Allegheny Mountains were settled by Scots-Irish immigrants, sturdy Presbyterians, whose arrival dated from the eighteenth century, a response to William Penn's open-hearted invitation. They transplanted themselves into the soil of Western Pennsylvania's hills and hollows, but unlike their Quaker hosts, constructed a culture of "Calvinistical" intolerance toward any who disagreed with them -- at least so we are told by the Unitarians who were there.

This paper summarizes the first chapter of my book (in progress) on the history of Unitarians and Universalists in Southwestern Pennsylvania. Central to this piece of the story are the English immigrants who first brought Unitarianism to Pittsburgh and faced a discouraging struggle to establish a lasting church presence in that city. It will show the importance of early western connections among the successful Unitarian churches in other western cities, and it will show evidence of the eastern connections from which western Unitarians derived sustenance. Importantly, this story richly illustrates the tension that often develops between East and West. Here it will be seen that the style and purpose of religious experience in the (Trans-Allegheny) West was distinct from that of the East, such that sometimes one excluded the other, and vice versa.

Benjamin Bakewell arrived in the “western country” of Pittsburgh from New York in 1808, having traveled with family and servants “in a Jersey wagon and pair.” Bakewell had suffered three serious business reversals in fourteen years. Now he would take up a new opportunity in the manufacture of glass. Coarse, gritty, and hard to get to, “with hogs and dogs running wild in the mud of so-called streets,” Pittsburgh was in fact a city full of commercial promise.¹ Situated at the point where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers come together to form the Ohio, Pittsburgh was a gateway to the Mississippi River, the Gulf of Mexico, and all port cities beyond. In the early years of his life in Pittsburgh, Bakewell built up his business, and Bakewell Glass became famous for producing the most exquisite flint glass in the country. As a “founding family” the Bakewell’s numbered among the wealthiest in the city; Benjamin helped found the Pittsburgh Permanent Library Company, the use of which was “restricted to members of polite society.”²

What would set Bakewell apart in the community in which he would live for the next thirty-six years was his liberal religious view. Growing up in Derby, England, Bakewell became acquainted as an adult with Joseph Priestley, Theophilus Lindsey, and other radicals in eighteenth-century England. Through these connections, he was prompted to leave the Anglican teachings gained from the uncle who raised him and become a Dissenter. The family record states: “He became Arian in theology, and remained all his life conscientious and earnest in this belief.”³ That Arian strain of Unitarian belief was prevalent among the

English radicals of his day, emphasizing a more clearly delineated system of belief about the humanity of Jesus than was emerging in eastern Massachusetts.⁴

In 1817, Bakewell placed an advertisement in the *Monthly Repository* in England to recruit a Unitarian minister for Pittsburgh.⁵ It was too early to expect that a Unitarian minister might be gotten from New England at that date. Three years later, a Mrs. Jean Armorer of Pittsburgh was successful in urging her father, the Rev. John Campbell of New Castle upon Tyne, to accept this invitation. Campbell's decision was prompted in part by his doctor who recommended the journey "to improve his health" (he suffered from asthma), and by his wife, who wanted the family to be together "in case he was called away."⁶ Rev. Campbell arrived in Pittsburgh, having completed a journey of five weeks by sailing ship and five days and four nights by stagecoach. He seems to have been well-suited to his western constituency. Bakewell later wrote: "He was heard by friends with great and increasing satisfaction; and although he made little pretensions to oratory (a good thing in the West), his complete knowledge of Scripture, and the kind, affectionate, and fervent manner in which he addressed them, arrested the attention and impressed the minds of all those who had the happiness to hear him."⁷ He had been, after all, a minister to miners. By spring of 1823, the trustees leased a lot and erected a brick church in the heart of the old walking city, a four-square-mile area fronting the point where the three rivers famously meet. Bakewell presented the church with a

large glass communion goblet, inscribed with the words, "This Do in Remembrance of Me."⁸

In this period, a Dutch land agent -- who had left Oldenbarneveld, New York to settle in Meadville, Pennsylvania -- often visited the Pittsburgh church. Harm Jan Huidekoper was inspired by Campbell's preaching, particularly Campbell's argument for the right, as well as the duty, of independent study of the scriptures. Huidekoper went home, says Charles Lyttle, and put this argument into practice.⁹ This resulted, he later claimed, in an entire change in his religious opinions.¹⁰ He founded in 1825 the Independent Congregational (Unitarian) Church of Meadville, which became incorporated in 1829. Huidekoper became a close friend to Bakewell -- the consequences of which will be seen as this story unfolds.

All too soon, the hope born of Campbell's ministry and the new brick church on Smithfield met with disappointment and grief. Campbell's struggle against asthma and its related complications ended with his death on July 20, 1824. He had had little expectation of recovery, said Bakewell, and was "frequently preparing the minds of his friends for what would be the inevitable result." Bakewell read a eulogy for Rev. Campbell, saying in part, "But for him these walls would never have been reared. May we be grateful that he was spared to come among us and lay the foundations of a church."¹¹

The American Unitarian Association (AUA) was founded in Boston one year after Campbell's death. American Unitarianism found its eighteenth-

century counterparts to Priestley and Lindsay in Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew, who (respectively) denounced the emotionalism of the Great Awakening, and argued for private judgment as the necessary arbiter of religious opinion.¹² Liberal Congregational ministers in New England began splitting away from their orthodox brethren, and by 1825, those who had taken the name Unitarian formed a society to disseminate information to ministers and their churches. The role of this organization in the East would now become a significant point of reference for the fledgling societies in the West, including the floundering society in Pittsburgh.

The richness of the Pittsburgh story at this point is revealed in two collections of letters: those Bakewell wrote to the AUA leadership and those he wrote to his friend in Meadville, Harm Jan Huidekoper. It is through these letters that Bakewell's twenty-year struggle to keep the church alive is brought painfully to life. In 1826, Bakewell wrote to Ezra Stiles Gannett, first General Secretary of the AUA, that Campbell's death was "a shock to our infant society."¹³ He told of the \$1600 building debt the society now held, and wondered if "our more opulent Eastern Brethren" could be of any assistance in discharging the debt. "Do you think anything can be done?" he asked. Over time these letters spoke of distributing hundreds of Unitarian tracts, for which Pittsburgh, said Bakewell, was a good "place of deposit." Favorite titles were "Discourses on Human Depravity" and "Scriptural Arguments for the Unitarian Faith." There were frequent references to the contents of the *Christian Register*

and *Western Messenger*, as well as matters relating to the frustrations of Pittsburgh.

At first, Bakewell tried to be optimistic. He believed that eruptions of prejudice aimed at Unitarians in Pittsburgh were a measure of its success. In 1825, he confided to Huidekoper, "Many orthodox divines are seriously (if not without cause) alarmed for their creeds and under the well grounded conviction that our sentiments are widely and rapidly spreading." He believed that "the time is not far distant when the fetters of...religious tyranny will be broken forever."¹⁴ Unfortunately, this expectation would not prove true.

The chief difficulty in sustaining a Unitarian congregation in Pittsburgh was the transience of the ministers. Indeed, ministers from New England found Pittsburgh an unwelcome city and had little taste for staying beyond a few months at most. Bakewell's letters to Huidekoper and the AUA presidents chronicle their rate of tenure. The first to arrive was the Rev. Mr. Swartzwelder. Bakewell's first mention of Swartzwelder was in December, 1827, to lament the fact that the latter had bought a farm in the area and was leaving his post at the church. To Huidekoper, Bakewell confided, "I wish you lived sufficiently closer to join us in supporting a minister."¹⁵ Swartzwelder stayed on good terms, it seems, and continued to preach for the society. Meanwhile, Huidekoper reported successful growth in the new Meadville congregation, to which Bakewell graciously replied, "I rejoice to hear the progress of liberal Christianity in your part – to form a society with more correct views of religious truth."¹⁶

Early in 1831, Bakewell wrote to Huidekoper, "I just received a letter from Dr. Ware that a young gentleman by the name of Arnold will come to officiate for us."¹⁷ Mr. George Arnold is described as "a person of some obscurity," having graduated from neither Harvard nor Andover Divinity Schools.¹⁸ He arrived in February 1831 and stayed until August 1832.

There is a certain amount of mystery concerning Mr. Arnold. A parishioner from that time explains that when Mr. Arnold's baby died, no other minister in town would officiate, due to their prejudice against his faith. "With tearful eye and faltering tongue," Mr. Arnold was left to conduct the funeral for his own child, and he soon "left the city for other regions where more humane feelings held sway."¹⁹ The questionable nature of this account is revealed in Bakewell's letters to Mr. Huidekoper, which show that Arnold's wife and family did not accompany him to Pittsburgh. Moreover, Bakewell made no mention of Mr. Arnold having lost a child. He did, however, say that Mr. Swartzwelder lost a child, and that Mr. Arnold officiated at the funeral. It may be that ongoing perceptions of persecution helped perpetuate a story, whether or not the story was true.

In Meadville, the Rev. Ephraim Peabody had accepted the "task of officiating as both tutor to the Huidekoper children and as minister to the congregation."²⁰ In 1830, Bakewell was aware that Peabody--who would soon rise to prominence in Unitarian ministry--desired to leave his post in Meadville. The reason, as Huidekoper explained it, was that serving as both tutor and

minister was too hard. Bakewell inquired, "Might Mr. Peabody consider coming to us where the work will be easier?"²¹ Ephraim Peabody, assuming he knew of the possibility, decided otherwise and took a church in Cincinnati. Bakewell's letters give the impression that his discouragement began to deepen after this. It seems there was no way he could make up for the impediments peculiar to Pittsburgh. Indeed, William Greenleaf Eliot passed through Pittsburgh on his way to St. Louis and described it in 1834 to James Freeman Clarke as "the nastiest place in creation."²²

In 1836, the AUA offered to send a minister to Pittsburgh as a "missionary to the West," with funding from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to Indians and Others. Bakewell was cautionary. The "want of success" at Pittsburgh was due to "the insistent prejudice which exists against our doctrines in this Community, and I am sorry to add, to the want of a little more zeal amongst ourselves." Further, he acknowledged, the salary of \$500 per year was not sufficient to attract "the talents we want" in light of "the privation a New England Clergyman must feel in giving up the Society he leaves behind for a residence in ours."²³ Finally, there were regional differences of style, by which "a more popular manner both in and out of the pulpit might succeed better." Tellingly, he confided, "The people of the West, you know, are much attracted to extemporaneous preaching, and overlook a little want of connection in a discourse if delivered with that greater degree of energy that mode seems to indicate."²⁴

Ministers in Pittsburgh who were funded by the SPG included Henry Miles, who arrived around noon on Sunday, July 3, 1837. Miles stayed three Sundays, counting the day of his arrival, and departed the city soon after because of illness. He called it dyspepsia, aggravated by the polluted drinking water that plagued Pittsburgh until it adopted water filtration in 1907. Bakewell wrote to Charles Briggs at the AUA, "Had health permitted him to sojourn amongst us for a longer time, we have good reason to believe he would have laid the foundation on which a respectable Congregation could have been established."²⁵ Miles remembered Pittsburgh in later years as a "hard field of labor."²⁶

Mr. Stephen Bulfinch arrived sometime in 1836 or 1837. He too was funded by the SPG. We are told that he and his new wife of one year liked Pittsburgh and intended to stay. Bakewell sent copies of Mr. Bulfinch's sermon on re-opening the church to Huidekoper, saying "if it makes no converts to our faith, its tendency will be to allay the prejudice which exists against it."²⁷ Bulfinch worked to re-build the church and expressed an interest in translating his sermons into German. "Thousands [in Pittsburgh] speak no other language," he stated, "and I am told some of them are anxious for Unitarian preaching."²⁸ Bulfinch did not stay, however, because his young wife died shortly after giving birth to their daughter.²⁹ Bakewell wrote to Briggs, "A gentleman of more memorable disposition or of more freely Christian Spirit than Mr. Bulfinch does not exist, and we shall for a long time feel the loss of him."³⁰

The last minister who officiated at the Pittsburgh church in Bakewell's lifetime was his cousin, Mr. William Johnstone Bakewell, who had served as a Unitarian minister in Scotland and England for a combined period of twenty years. Benjamin asked the AUA for financial assistance in bringing his cousin and family to Pittsburgh, and soon after this, he reported with great pleasure that they had safely arrived. Benjamin did not mean to presume in the matter of hiring his kinsman. He hoped the society would "hear him and approve him and invite him to stay."³¹ William Bakewell was invited by unanimous vote, after giving four sermons, to serve the Pittsburgh church.³²

Unfortunately, early in 1843, Benjamin reported "with feelings of mortification" that the society had "dwindled to a very small number of members." His relative, William Bakewell, had become discouraged as a result and resigned his position with the congregation.³³ Benjamin reported moreover that "William's mode of preaching" was "not suited to the Western Country, and little calculated to attract hearers, who pay more regard to sound than sense."³⁴ Here again was his perception of a cultural distinction so obvious in the mode of thinking by which western people experienced religion.

At this point, he gave up all hope of sustaining a Unitarian church in Pittsburgh, even offering his books on English Unitarianism to any infant society if it would be helpful.³⁵ The final blow was that his cousin, William Bakewell, joined with the Episcopalians and published an address entitled "Unitarianism Renounced" in *The Episcopal Recorder*, May 13, 1843. Here he attempted to tell the

Unitarians at Norwich and Edinburgh and Pittsburgh that their views were wrong. Bakewell asked Harm Jan Huidekoper, to write a refutation of William Bakewell's arguments. The refutation appeared the following August in the *Christian Register and Boston Observer* and in September in *The Monthly Miscellany of Religion and Letters*.³⁶

From the evidence we have, it is clear that the Pittsburgh church was for twenty-three years a fragile affair. That it survived as long as it did was substantially due to the determination of one man, Benjamin Bakewell. James Freeman Clarke later wrote of him, "He supported the church almost alone. Success or failure was not the question. It was his business to support the church--not make it succeed."³⁷ Throughout that time, the English Unitarian Bakewell maintained connections with the American Unitarian denomination at its highest levels. He solicited and distributed Unitarian tracts, corresponded with and arranged accommodations for numerous short-lived ministers, and contributed generously from his personal finances.³⁸ Bakewell also engaged in a lively correspondence with Harm Jan Huidekoper in Meadville, in which they discussed Unitarian theology, publications, and congregational matters. In 1836, when the building for the First Independent Congregational (Unitarian) Church in Meadville was dedicated, Huidekoper read aloud these words penned by Bakewell: "I congratulate you on the prospect of completing the erection of a beautiful Temple dedicated to the praise of the Universal Parent."³⁹

Conditions specific to Pittsburgh largely account for the struggle to build a Unitarian congregation there. There were indeed serious health risks, it was remote and hard to get to, and the Unitarians faced suspicion and hostility from the city's majority population, 67 percent of whom were Presbyterian in 1820.⁴⁰ It is hard not to hear the disparagement in Bakewell's reference to the people "who would think themselves polluted by reading a Unitarian book."⁴¹

Awareness of these difficulties at Pittsburgh may account for why the Boston-based *Christian Register* reported in 1829 that the only Unitarian place of worship west of the mountains was in Meadville.⁴² Curiously, this "fact" was passed down to later historians. Francis Christie, writing in 1927, describes the church at Meadville as the "only Unitarian church west of the Allegheny Mountains" in its time. Linda Pritchard's 1989 "Social History of Religion in Pittsburgh" lists a number of denominations, but offers no mention of the presence of Unitarians in the city before 1890.

Bakewell's death in 1844 marked the end of an era for the Unitarian congregation in Pittsburgh. His will contained a provision that turned the church and its lot over to his heirs, who sold it to another congregation. In that same year, Huidekoper founded a Theological School at Meadville, whose purpose was to train "missionary" ministers for the West. Its benefit to Pittsburgh and the West in later years would prove incalculable.

An obituary that appeared in both the *Pittsburgh Chronicle* and the *Christian Register* (perhaps authored by Harm Jan Huidekoper) described

Bakewell as a man “on whose fidelity entire reliance might be placed.” To the “very last moment of consciousness,” he exhibited “that kind of consideration for others which distinguished his whole life.” Poignantly, the writer closed: “Dear venerable friend, farewell.”⁴³

Six years later, Mordecai De Lange arrived in Pittsburgh as a Minister-at-Large, having spent a year of study at the Meadville Theological School (1847). De Lange had converted to Unitarianism from Judaism, inspired in part by William Greenleaf Eliot, while living in St. Louis. He wrote to Rev. Calvin Lincoln in Boston, “Pittsburgh is a post of surprising importance, in which we have to retrieve the disgrace and dispiriting results of failure.”⁴⁴ That retrieval is the next chapter of the story.

¹ Leland Baldwin, *Pittsburgh: The Story of a City, 1750-1865* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1937) 203.

² Joseph Rishel, *Founding Families of Pittsburgh: The Evolution of a Regional Elite, 1760-1910* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990) 59-61

³ Benjamin Gifford Bakewell, *The Family Book of Bakewell, Page and Campbell* (Pittsburgh: William G. Johnston and Company, 1896) 46. Heinz History Center, Library and Archives Division, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh, PA.

⁴ Andrew Hill argues that the English version of Unitarianism at this stage was more rigid and deterministic than the version that emerges a bit later among New Englanders in America. It is possible to say that had Bakewell been raised by his Presbyterian father who died, he might more naturally have made this religious transition in his youth.

⁵ Andrew Hill, John Campbell, unpublished paper, The Unitarian Church of Edinburgh, date unknown. Hill references the *Monthly Repository*, 1817, 186b, and 1818, 627.

⁶ *Daughter contributes*, appended later to the *Memoriam to John Campbell*, date unknown.

⁷ “Obituary of the Rev. John Campbell,” *The Unitarian Miscellany and Christian Monitor*, October 1824, 218-223.

⁸ Thomas C. Pears, Jr., “The First Successful Flint Glass Factory in America: Bakewell, Pears, & Co., 1808-1882” in *Antiques* magazine, March 1827.

⁹ Charles Lyttle, *Freedom Moves West: A History of the Western Unitarian Conference, 1852-1952*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952) 18. Blackstone Editions, Providence: Unitarian Universalist Society, 2006.

¹⁰ Swetnam, “The Planting,” in *Pittsburgh’s First Church*, 6-7.

- ¹¹ Bakewell, *In Memoriam*, 1824.
- ¹² David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985) 19, 47.
- ¹³ Benjamin Bakewell, letter to Rev. Ezra S. Gannett, General Secretary to the American Unitarian Association, 19 February 1826. Archives, Andover Harvard Library, Boston, MA.
- ¹⁴ Bakewell, letter to Huidekoper, 11 October 1825. Archives of the Heinz Center, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania (HSWP), Pittsburgh, PA.
- ¹⁵ Bakewell, letter to Huidekoper, 4 December 1827. HSWP.
- ¹⁶ Benjamin Bakewell, letter to Huidekoper, 15 February 1829. HSWP.
- ¹⁷ Bakewell, letter to Huidekoper, 29 January 1831. HSWP.
- ¹⁸ It is likely that the Dr. Ware in question was William, son of Henry Ware, Sr. and brother of Henry Ware, Jr., both of whom were faculty at the Harvard Divinity School. William Ware was the minister of the All Souls Church from 1821 to 1836. Walter Donald Kring, *Liberals Among the Orthodox: Unitarian Beginnings in New York City, 1819-1839* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974) 180-181.
- ¹⁹ Marthens, letter to St. John, December 1891. Church Records, HSWP.
- ²⁰ Bakewell, letter to Huidekoper, 23 June 1831. HSWP.
- ²¹ Bakewell, letters to Huidekoper, July 8 and 26, 1830. Bakewell had something of a stake in Peabody's career as he had helped arrange for a minister to travel to Meadville to officiate at Peabody's installation. At one point, Bakewell announced to Huidekoper that Swartzwelder had agreed to do it. This did not happen, perhaps due to the death of Swartzwelder's daughter. HSWP.
- ²² Even William Greenleaf Eliot, a New Englander who pioneered the First Unitarian Church of St. Louis and founded Washington University, wrote in 1834 to James Freeman Clarke of Boston, "Were you ever in Pittsburgh? Then congratulate yourself, for you have escaped the nastiest place in creation." Earl Holt, *William Greenleaf Eliot: Conservative Radical*, (St. Louis: The First Unitarian Church, 1985) 32.
- ²³ Bakewell, letter to Rev. Charles Briggs, 25 May 1836. Andover-Harvard Archives.
- ²⁴ Bakewell, letter to Rev. Charles Briggs, 25 May 1836. A-H.
- ²⁵ Bakewell, letter to Rev. Charles Briggs, 23 July 1836. A-H.
- ²⁶ Henry A. Miles, letter to St. John, 9 January 1893. Church Records, HSWP.
- ²⁷ Bakewell, letter to Huidekoper, 1 November 1837. Bakewell letters, HSWP.
- ²⁸ Ellen Bulfinch, letter to Charles Eliot St. John, 1893. Church Records, HSWP.
- ²⁹ Ellen Bulfinch, letter to Charles Eliot St. John, 1893. Church Records, HSWP.
- ³⁰ Benjamin Bakewell, letter to Rev. Charles Briggs, 28 March 1838. A-H.
- ³¹ Benjamin Bakewell, letter to Rev. Charles Briggs, 7 January 1839. A-H.
- ³² Benjamin Bakewell, letter to Rev. Charles Briggs, 29 June 1839. A-H.
- ³³ Bakewell, letter to Rev. Charles Briggs, 7 January 1843. A-H.
- ³⁴ Bakewell, letter to Rev. Charles Briggs, 7 January 1843. A-H. Other churches successfully established in the West were Cincinnati (1830), Louisville (1830), Buffalo (1831), St. Louis (1835), and Chicago (1836).
- ³⁵ The Campbellites grew out of conflict among Baptists over evangelicalism vs. "antimissionism." Inspired by Thomas and Alexander Campbell, they espoused the latter category, eventually moving across the river into Ohio and taking a new name, Disciples of Christ. See Linda Pritchard, "The Soul of the City: A Social History of Religion in Pittsburgh," in Samuel Hays, ed., *City at the Point: Essays on the Social History of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989)331.
- ³⁶ *The Monthly Miscellany of Religion and Letters*, 1 September 1843, 177; *Christian Register and Boston Observer*, 19 August 1843, 131.
- ³⁷ James Freeman Clarke, *The Monthly Magazine*, August, 1860.
- ³⁸ *In Memoriam*, a tribute to Benjamin Bakewell written by his daughter, Nancy, c. 1844.
- ³⁹ Bakewell, letter to Huidekoper, 18 April 1836. HSWP.
- ⁴⁰ Between 1830 and 1859, forty Presbyterian congregations were founded in Pittsburgh and similar numbers were established in proportion to the population in the surrounding villages Linda Pritchard, "The Soul of the City" in Samuel Hays, ed., *City at the Point: Essays on the Social History of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989) 333.
- ⁴¹ Bakewell, letter to Huidekoper, 2 June 1826. HSWP.
- ⁴² Cited in *Christian Register*, 1829.
- ⁴³ "Benjamin Bakewell, Esq." *Christian Register*, Mar. 2, 1844, 35.

⁴⁴ Mordecai De Lange, writing from St. Louis, letter to Calvin Lincoln, addressed as “Friend and Brother,” 4 October 1850. Inactive Minister Files, Box 45 A-H Archives.