

## THE MISSION OF REV. DANIEL WALDO STEVENS THE FIRST UNITARIAN MINISTER ON MARTHA'S VINEYARD

Rev. Daniel Waldo Stevens came to Holmes Hole in 1867 at the behest of the American Unitarian Association as a missionary to sailors. He was forty-seven. At that time 10,000 sailing ships per year were making their way through Vineyard Sound on their way to and from New York and Boston.

Rev. Stevens graduated from Harvard Divinity School in 1848 and had been the minister of the Unitarian Church in Mansfield. However, he came to the Vineyard from his position as superintendent of schools in Fall River. His charge was to minister to the sailors who stopped in Holmes Hole harbor, many to get supplies, but mostly for safety during bad weather. Charles Banks knew Rev. Stevens, and, in his *History of Martha's Vineyard*, wrote that Rev. Stevens was "a man of strong intellect, unconventional in his methods, and full of enthusiasm."

But we must go back to 1860 to understand the setting into which Rev. Stevens came.

At this time the Vineyard had three towns, Tisbury (including what is now West Tisbury), Edgartown (including Cottage City) and Chilmark. Gay Head was Indian Lands, not yet a town. Holmes Hole was a village in Tisbury which changed its name to Vineyard Haven in 1871.

At this time Unitarians and Universalists had not incorporated Humanitarian thinking into their theology. They were firmly Christian although not Trinitarians. They were called Liberal Christians to differentiate them from the Orthodox Congregationalists of their roots.

After the Revolution and into the early 1800's, Rev. Samuel Thaxter was the Congregational Minister in Edgartown, so he was paid by the town. He had, according to Banks, Unitarian leanings, and was considered by his congregation to be somewhat of a "gentle heretic". His ministry was followed by several itinerant Universalist ministers who visited the various island towns from time to time. The First Universalist Society of Holmes Hole was established in the year 1860. The Holmes Hole Congregational church, built in 1844, had disbanded. Their minister had moved to what we now call West Tisbury. The Universalists met in and planned to purchase their one story Meeting House, which is presently our Town Hall. Bro. Bruce of Marion, MA, was instrumental in getting them established. Their founding congregation numbered forty-seven and had an active Sunday School. There were also Baptist and Methodist congregations in Holmes Hole. Shortly after the congregation formed, Bro. Bruce moved to Newburyport and Br. J. H. Tuller came from Essex.

The Universalist Society minutes, transcribed from the originals, now in the Martha's Vineyard Museum, are available in our UUSMV library. Their transcribed By-Laws are

also in our UUSMV library. We also have information about them from the *Trumpet and Christian Register*, the Universalist periodical which I was able to read at the Harvard Andover Divinity School library.

It seems that they were served once or twice by settled ministers who stayed briefly, but mostly by pulpit supply ministers. Their minutes are bare, being only of Annual Meetings when elections of officers took place. This was the situation when Rev. Stevens came to Holmes Hole seven years later.

The First Universalist Society of Holmes Hole was approached by a representative of the American Unitarian Association who offered to have Rev. Stevens provide them with ministerial services in addition to his duties the Sailors Reading Room and Chapel. It had become increasingly difficult for the Universalists to fill their pulpit. A meeting was called, the First Universalist Society of Holmes Hole voted to become the Church of the Unity under the jurisdiction of the American Unitarian Association, and shortly afterwards they were invited to send a delegate to the Channing Conference. Terms of employment for Rev. Stevens were written.

Thus the Unitarians and Universalists of Holmes Hole merged to some degree almost one hundred years before the 1961 formal merger. The Vineyard was not the only place where such partial mergers occurred.

Meanwhile, Rev. Stevens was very busy establishing his mission to the sailors. He purchased a 1740 house overlooking the harbor just down the beach from the chandlery at the end of Grove Ave. At this time, the center of shipping was the outer harbor as the sailing ships needed a lot of room to maneuver. This house was located on what was then called Union Bluff but is now Hatch Road. Mike Wallace now lives on this site. Later, according to Jim Norton's book, *Walking in Vineyard Haven*, the house was moved to the corner of Main and Locust Streets and enlarged.

Because Rev. Stevens was employed by the American Unitarian Association, he was required to send quarterly reports to them. These are available in the Harvard Andover Divinity School library and I have read them. They are quite verbose and somewhat repetitive, so I have excerpted the parts that were pertinent, leaving out the repetitions and the fulsome polite remarks. These notes are also available in our UUSMV library.

The first letter from Tisbury invited the AUA secretary to the dedication of the Sailors Free Reading room on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August 1868. Dr. Gannet, one of the AUA founders, also came and the event was written up in the AUA publication, the *Register*.

At first Rev. Stevens had many expenses to get things set up, many financial difficulties, and progress was slow. He notes that it is "as expensive to live on the Vineyard as it is in Boston." His "faithful wife" had to go home to her family in Mansfield due to ill health. He had regular Sunday and Thursday evening services in the Reading Room and had been asked to deal with the corpse of a drowned sailor. The Church of the Unity was not able

to pay him the agreed upon amount.

Two years later he reported that the numbers at services have increased, and in June of 1870 he writes that he does not charge the AUA for rent of the Reading Room, does his own sweeping, keeps fires going, travels four miles a day, (one of his services to sailors was to go to the village to post mail).

He received much hostility from the Baptist, Methodist, and YMCA congregation members who threatened, but failed, to set up rival missions. Little boys were sent to make a racket under the chapel windows when he was conducting services.

In July of 1870 he reports that he stocks the Reading Room with 26 periodicals, cuts the leaves of magazines, trims the lamps, sweeps (the sailors tend to spit on the floor), and oversees the library books, which he also lends to neighbors as well as sailors. He was asked to do the funeral of a sailor who died from typhoid, and to give the address at the cornerstone laying of the Martha's Vineyard Seminary.

In 1871 there is a heartbreaking series of events. His wife, who had returned to the island, was gravely ill. We first learn that they have a three year old daughter and she, too, is gravely ill. His wife died and a grown son came from off-island to accompany his mother's body to her funeral and burial in Mansfield. Rev. Stevens had to stay with the very sick daughter who, tragically, died a few days later.

During this time the Reading Room services had increased attendance. Rev. Stevens writes of his financial difficulties "as he is paid less than when Supt. of School in Fall River" and had many more expenses. For example, he had to buy a heavy coat and long boots for visiting ships in winter, as most of his ministry was during bad weather. He had added another room which friends furnished. In lieu of salary, the Church of the Unity, where attendance has been "less than it should be", gave him five weeks of summer vacation.

Rev. Stevens had a poster printed in 1875. The original is in the Martha's Vineyard Museum, and an enlarged copy is on the wall of our office. He took this poster out to visiting ships as an invitation to attend services in the Chapel and to use the Reading Room and library. As a departure from our usual practice, I invite you to join me in reading in unison a portion of the very liberal and welcoming invitation he extends to sailors:

"All seamen, of whatever nation, and the public are earnestly invited to visit the above named institution and to attend public worship there Sunday forenoons and evening, and Thursday evenings. Bell rings half an hour before service. Free seats. Free gospel. No contribution-boxes. No respect to persons on account of dress, color or religious opinions.

“The word of God is not bound” to any sect,  
party or nation.

In front of the premises there is  
a good wharf affording about seven feet of water  
for landing, also at the head of the same there is  
a well of fresh water and all the means for filling  
casks in boats. All seamen, yacht clubs, and the  
public are cordially invited to make use of all  
these privileges ( worship services, museum,  
Reading Room which has twenty-five  
different newspapers giving the marine news for  
the Atlantic Coast, and others representing the  
religious views of several Christian sects, and  
the library which contains eleven hundred books)  
free of charge.

Rev. Stevens further stated that there was a museum of Indian relics and “all sailors are invited to aid in securing marine shells, minerals, fossil remains and curiosities from all parts of the world. Indian relics and all things relating to the early history of Martha's Vineyard are especially desirable.” Although Charles Banks stated that Rev. Stevens' son gave it to the museum in Bristol, RI, I have been unable to find what happened to this most interesting and valuable collection.

The Reading Room library with its eleven hundred books was free to borrowers for two weeks. Later Rev. Stevens noted frequently that this was the largest free library on the Vineyard at that time. A fire to warm the room was provided, and it must have been of great comfort to sailors on a cold, wet and windy day.

He provided materials for writing letters and took them to the town post office daily which is a walk of one mile each way. He also provides U. S. Coast Survey Charts and Tide Tables, “direct from Washington, for sale at Government prices.”

The free water for filling casks was piped to the end of the dock enabling the casks to be filled without removing them from the dories. The nearby chandlery charged ten cents per cask and provided no piping.

He took meteorological observations for the Smithsonian. Prof. Agaziz of Harvard, well known biologist of the time, persuaded Rev. Stevens to ship turtles to his assistant in Cambridge.

The AUA provided free tracts for the sailors to read. These were available in the Reading Room and also delivered to the ships. Some titles were: “The Oiled Feather”, “The Man Who Kept Himself in Repair”, “The Power of Soap and Water” and “The Beliefs of

Unitarians“. Bibles were also provided by Massachusetts Bible Society.

Hostilities by Baptists and Methodists gradually diminished. Rev. Stevens was invited to be the chaplain for the Marine Hospital (perhaps because he is neither Baptist or Methodist). Neighbors and children from the village were borrowing books from the library and neighbors supplied a Christmas tree. Rev. Stevens gave free lectures illustrated by sciopicon. During one lecture about John Calvin, he made an effort to “make sure everyone understood how heinous John Calvin’s crime against Michael Servatus was”. Some summer visitors came from the Campground. Letters of praise were received from ship Captains and several donations. An organist was hired. By 1875 he was chairman of the Vineyard Haven School Committee “because intellectual cultivation is a strong ally of Unitarianism”.

Changes were noted: In 1875, a new road made it possible to get to the Campground in only three miles instead of going around the Lagoon or taking a boat to Eastville. Churches were closed during the summer as everyone was going there, but the Chapel remained open. The arrangements with the Church of the Unity collapsed, the church records noted that Rev. Stevens was insufficiently attentive and the reports of Rev. Stevens state that he was never paid the agreed upon amount. The minutes of the Church of the Unity end in 1880.

The Dukes County Educational Association met in the chapel for three days with distinguished off-island speakers. He preached in Christian town. The Society for the Propagation of the Faith compensated him for his ministry to Indians. He was finally provided with a horse and carriage. He became moderator of the Vineyard Haven town meeting. As the chapel and Rev. Stevens’ ministry were picturesque and of human interest, articles were written about it in the mainstream press. Summer visitors were more numerous.

Rev. Stevens is known for possessing a “Breeches Bible” of 1599, - a valuable collector’s item first printed in Geneva in 1560 in which the translation states that “The eyes of Adam and Eve were opened and they beheld that they were naked and they sewed figge tree leaves together and made themselves breeches”. He also owned the “*Shepherds Sincore Convert*” in the Indian language, by John Elliot.

Rev. Stevens preached twice to the Methodist Campground and was invited to fill the pulpit in the Vineyard Haven Methodist Church.

In 1878 he became the island agent for the Shaw Asylum for Mariners’ Children, and this became one of his most treasured tasks, as he was able to use the institution’s funds (several thousand dollars over the years) to assist many destitute families when the sailor who is head of the household has died or become ill. He explained to all recipients that Robert Shaw was a good Unitarian.

In 1880 the first Unitarian Cape Cod Conference met on the Vineyard, in the

Campground, thanks to Rev. Stevens making the arrangements.

The following December neighbors put up a Christmas tree and townspeople sent 50 presents (for the seamen).

Rev. Stevens had become the president of the Vineyard Haven Literary Association which purchased and met in the old Congregational Meeting House which is now known as Association Hall and, later, became the Town Hall.

In 1883 he feared that the new Episcopal Church, (which was located on this plot of land), would siphon off some of the townspeople who had been attending the Chapel services during the summer. A new town Brass Band was formed. They marched a mile to give him their first serenade. He was glad that his friends were damaged only slightly when the Vineyard Haven Main Street burned. His check went astray because the post office was demolished.

Rev. Stevens noted an increased number of summer visitors (many from mainland Unitarian churches), and many new homes in his area of town. There is no mention of Rev. Antoinette Brown Blackwell, the first woman Unitarian minister, who summered in Chilmark. There were fewer ships as more shipping was by steam engine. His health had declined and he had resigned as Pres. of the Dukes County Educational Assoc., Chairman of the School Board and Chairman of the Finance Committee but remained Pres. of the Literary Assoc.

In 1887 he reported that "a Boston Company has introduced Water Works and bought 600 acres of land for housing lots". This would become the West Chop community. In December there was a celebration of the Water Works and Rev. Stevens was asked to give the main address. He noted that some of the people building houses were Unitarians, but he did not know if they would benefit the mission. He described an increase in summer visitors, but a decrease in the number of sailors. Steam ships did not have the same need to seek shelter in our harbor during storms.

Now, twenty years into his mission, he noted, "I wish I had more strength and less years". At the same time was is pleased to have been asked to give the principle address to a July 4<sup>th</sup> gathering of one thousand "Sons of Martha's Vineyard" celebration in Edgartown.

His reports continued through January of 1891. I don't know what happened to him between January and the time he died ten months later.

He died here on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1891 and was buried in Marlborough where he was born. Rev. Stevens never remarried. Sometimes his niece lived with him and did his cooking; sometimes he "boarded out" in the neighborhood.

The Vineyard Gazette reported on October 9<sup>th</sup>, "Mr. Daniel Stevens (Rev. Stevens' son)

of Boston arrived on Wednesday, the guest of Capt. Gilbert Smith. Capt. Gilbert Smith left on Saturday to attend the funeral of the Rev. D. W. Stevens". The funeral was held in Marlborough and the oration was given by Rev. Augustus Woodbury, a lifelong friend. One of Rev. Stevens last requests was that Rev. Woodbury officiate at his funeral.

The following week the Gazette reported a Memorial Service at the Seamen's Chapel with Rev. J. F. Moors of Boston repeating many of Rev. Woodbury's remarks. Mr. Daniel Stevens and Miss Eunice Stevens (his niece) attended this service.

Rev. Woodbury said, "Thus he has lived - an active, useful, honorable life. Thus he has died in peace. His threescore years and ten here have been well spent. He has entered upon the heavenly life to rejoice in the immortal vigor of a pure, faithful, true, and loyal soul." The cause of Unitarianism, the island, and his congregation were well served during Rev. Stevens time among us.

Rev. Stevens' will stipulated that land be given to the American Unitarian Association with the provision that a chapel be built upon it within the next two years. This was not done. However, wishing to honor his father's request, his son gave an almost identical piece of land to the Channing District on which to build a chapel. In 1896 this chapel was built by the Channing District on Old Lighthouse Road. We remain very grateful to this remarkable man for whom our chapel is named.

Let us dedicate ourselves to being equally as liberal, welcoming, understanding of other points of view, and of service to others.

Sarah Shepard  
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