



The First Parish church in Portland participated in arguably the first Unitarian split in the United States. Led by Pastor Samuel Deane, a theological Liberal, the First Parish became a Unitarian bastion, while on two separate occasions Calvinists seceded from the First to form their own parish. From the Collections of the First Parish Church of Portland.

ECHOES OF A DISTANT THUNDER?: THE UNITARIAN CONTROVERSY IN MAINE, 1734-1833

BY DAVID RAYMOND

The Unitarian Controversy (1734-1833) was one of the most divisive denominational separations in the annals of American church history. Historians generally have confined their study to the churches of Massachusetts proper, neglecting the vital role that Maine churches played in the various phases of the separation. Maine Congregationalists were among the first to recognize and protest the emergence of Unitarian ministers in their churches, and they took the lead in the movement to force Unitarians out of the Congregational Church. Although small in numbers, Maine churches played an important role in this significant theological controversy. The author is a History Instructor and Chair of the Arts and Sciences Department at Northern Maine Community College.

IN 1805 a theological dispute erupted in the heart of Puritan New England that would divide the Congregational churches of Massachusetts and lead to the formation of a separate Unitarian denomination. What began in 1734 as a rational protest against the emotional excesses of the Great Awakening culminated nearly 100 years later with the severance of the Liberal wing of the Congregational Church into a separate Unitarian denomination. In all, approximately 150 Unitarian churches separated from the Congregational landscape. This represented a loss of nearly one-third of the Congregational churches in Massachusetts and nearly ten percent of the Maine Congregational churches. It was one of the most bitter and significant controversies in American religious history.¹

The Unitarian Controversy passed through four distinct phases: a gradual drift into liberalism, followed by the separation of the Unitarians from the Calvinists along institutional, theological, and denominational grounds. The theological drift into liberalism (1734-1805) began during the Great Awakening when a number of Puritan divines, led by Old Calvinists such as Charles Chauncy, Jonathan Mayhew, and

Ebenezer Gay, registered their concern with the emotional excesses of the revival.² Convinced that spiritual conversion was an orderly, rational process manifested over time in the character of the person, a number of Boston-area clergy denounced as dubious the claims of instantaneous conversions that accompanied the great revival. In the years that followed, these men continued their rational assault on other doctrines, subjecting them to the same skeptical scrutiny. By 1800, the Liberals had adopted three key theological innovations which separated them from traditional Congregationalists: Arminianism, which afforded humans a role in conversion; Supernatural Rationalism, or confidence in humans' ability to know the will of God through reason; and anti-Trinitarianism – the rejection of Jesus as equal part of triune God, opting instead for the Arian view that Christ was not God but higher than humanity.³

Due to the Liberals' (as the Unitarians were first known) tacit rule of letting "sleeping dogmas lie," the extent of their rejection of Calvinism was not well known until 1805, when the Board of Overseers for Harvard College clashed over the election of a successor to the moderate Calvinist, the Rev. David Tappan, as professor of divinity. This battle, won by the Liberals with the election of Henry Ware as professor of divinity and the subsequent selection of J.T. Kirkland as president of Harvard, led to the next phase in the controversy: the institutional separation (1805-1815). Under the steady urging of Jedidiah Morse, the Orthodox (as the defenders of traditional Trinitarian Calvinist theology were known) worked diligently to distance themselves from the Liberals by establishing their own periodical, *The Panoplist*, in 1805, by founding their own school for theological training, Andover Theological Seminary, in 1807, and by taking steps to sever all manner of Christian fellowship, including pulpit exchanges, ordination councils, and other forms of church/parish relations, beginning around 1809.⁴ As the publications and public accusations multiplied, so did the tension between church and parish. Usually a dispute arose because a Liberal parish fought with an Orthodox church over the selection of a minister and pulpit exchanges. When the two sides came to loggerheads, as they often did, one side or the other would appeal to ecclesiastical council for mediation and advice. Invariably these councils, the selection of which was theologically politicized, proved ineffective, and when they did, the parishes would wrest control of church property from Orthodox churches by virtue of their power of the purse and ownership of the real estate.⁵

The institutional separation culminated with the publication of Morse's pamphlet *American Unitarianism* in 1815, which attempted to

link American Liberals with the more radical forms of Unitarianism emanating from England and the continent. Landing in the theological landscape like a bombshell, Morse's pamphlet set off a public debate over theology that led to the theological separation of the two factions (1815-1825). The paper war that ensued engaged the great theological minds of that generation: William Ellery Channing, Henry Ware, and Andrews Norton for the Liberals; and Samuel Worcester, Moses Stuart, and Leonard Woods on the side of the Orthodox.⁶

Institutional separation at the local level began with the selection of the minister and/or pulpit exchanges. Traditionally, the church chose the pastor, with the consent of the parish, and the parish provided financial support. Once the Unitarian Controversy began, the parish, which was generally more liberal in its views, challenged the authority of the church, which was usually more orthodox, to call a minister. Sometimes the controversy arose at the time of ordination, when the incoming pastor was examined by an ordaining council of his peers to determine if his doctrine was sound. Other times the conflict developed gradually as the minister's views and sermons grew progressively more liberal. The infamous Dedham decision (*Baker v. Fales*) of 1820 gave the parish and not the church the right to control church property and the selection of ministers; thus, when the two sides could not settle matters through conciliation, the parishes would often refuse to pay the salary of the Orthodox minister and/or would unilaterally call a Liberal minister to settle without any input from the church.⁷

Even when a pastor was examined, ordained, settled, and his sermons were deemed acceptable by both parish and church, trouble still could arise over the pastor's policy of pulpit exchange. Pulpit exchange was a common practice of the day whereby a minister would preach the morning sermon in his church and swap pulpits with a neighboring pastor for the afternoon service. Members of the parish insisted on a broad and generous policy of pulpit exchange from Orthodox ministers to ensure exposure to the preaching of nearby Liberal pastors. But Trinitarian ministers, who sincerely believed that Unitarianism was undermining true religion, were reluctant to exchange pulpits with their Liberal colleagues for fear of corrupting the faith of the members of the church. When a pastor refused to exchange pulpits with his Liberal colleagues, the Unitarians of his parish and church would pressure him to do so and, if he refused, would try to have him dismissed.

Once institutional relations were severed and the theological distinctions were drawn, the controversy terminated with the denominational separation of the Liberals from the Orthodox churches (1825-

1833). From 1820 to 1833, Liberal minorities in the churches often joined forces with Liberal majorities in the parish to force a Unitarian pastor on an Orthodox congregation. Refusing to sit under what they deemed heretical preaching, the Orthodox withdrew and formed new churches based on traditional Congregational theology. By 1825 relations between the two factions were so bitter that Unitarians banded together to form the American Unitarian Association as a separate, formal denomination. This theological division was completed in 1833 when the Commonwealth of Massachusetts disestablished the Standing Order and with it, the financial benefits and status that accrued to the state's official religion. From then on, the Unitarians and Congregationalists effectively went their separate ways.⁸

Much has been written about the Unitarian Controversy, but little attention has been paid to the role that Maine churches played in the conflict.⁹ While Maine may have followed a path similar to that of Massachusetts, it differed from the Bay State in a number of significant ways. Like Massachusetts, a number of Maine clergy grew more liberal following the Great Awakening, but unlike the movement in Massachusetts, this drift did not go unchallenged. Ministers who openly preached Liberal views were driven from the pulpit, while those who quietly embraced their new views and did not preach controversial dogma escaped controversy and dismissal. With the outbreak of the institutional separation in 1805, Maine Congregationalists took the lead in driving a wedge between Unitarians and Calvinists.¹⁰ The conflict in Portland between the First Parish and Second Parish was one of the first conflicts of the institutional separation, as the Calvinists refused to cooperate with Unitarians in a number of capacities, such as ordaining councils, pulpit exchanges, and ministerial associations.

Although Maine did not have a theologian of sufficient stature to participate in the great theological debates, Maine churches were well in advance of those in Massachusetts when it came to the denominational separation of churches. With a heightened awareness brought on by the theological separation, Maine churches became more diligent in confronting Unitarians and forcing a theological showdown in the parishes. Spurred on by a more competitive denominational environment and meddlesome outsiders, the majority of church divisions in Maine were nearly over by 1820, when the church splits in Massachusetts were reaching their peak. Rather than being peripheral to the Unitarian Controversy, churches in Maine were in fact at the forefront of one of the most heated religious controversies in U.S. history.

The Drift into Theological Liberalism, 1734-1805

Despite the District's rural setting, a number of churches in Maine underwent a theological transition remarkably similar to that of Boston and the surrounding region. Not only was Maine home to the second Unitarian church in New England, it also saw a proportionate number of its clergy gradually move into the Liberal camp during this period. The main difference between the Maine Liberal movement and the Massachusetts Liberal movement was the reaction of the lay people. In Massachusetts, the drift occurred almost without incident and generally with the consent of the churches and parishes presided over by these clerics. In Maine, Unitarians, with a few exceptions, were vigorously resisted everywhere that they emerged.

Maine was intimately connected with the formation of the first Unitarian churches in America. The first openly Unitarian church was the Episcopalian King's Chapel in Boston, formed in 1785 under the leadership of James Freeman. Like other Boston clergy, Freeman studied the works of Joseph Priestly and Theophilus Lindsey and regularly exchanged views with other leading Unitarian thinkers, such as the Rev. William Hazlitt of England. Encouraged by the prospects for Liberal religion in America, Hazlitt came to the United States in 1783, preaching in Philadelphia and Boston before settling down in Hallowell, Maine, in the winter of 1784-85. Hazlitt's openly Unitarian preaching provoked the ire of General Henry Sewall, a prominent member of the church and self-appointed "censor of the pulpit," who worked diligently to drive Hazlitt out of the area. In the spring, Hazlitt returned to Boston, where he supported James Freeman in his conversion and his revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* to exclude any Trinitarian references. These innovations led to a delay in Freeman's petition for ordination and ultimately to the formation of the first openly Unitarian church in America.

Although Hazlitt may have been driven from the Maine wilderness, his ideas made their way back into the area through the friendship of Freeman and Thomas Oxnard of Portland. Oxnard, like Freeman, was a lay reader in the Episcopal Church who was trying to revive Anglican worship after the American Revolutionary War. After assuming his duties in 1787, Oxnard began to study theology in preparation for ordination. Oxnard became convinced of the rightness of Unitarian theology through his reading of the works of early Unitarians Joseph Priestly, Theophilus Lindsey, and Thomas Belsham and his correspondence with Belsham, Hazlitt, and Freeman. In 1792, he informed his congregation of

his change of sentiments and, with their consent and support, drew up a Unitarian statement of faith. After his application for ordination was denied, Oxnard and his followers formed the second Unitarian society in America, which lasted until Oxnard's death in 1799.¹¹

This Boston-Maine connection also proved vital to the advance of Liberal theology in the Congregational churches in Maine. Even though Maine was outside of the twenty-mile radius that was the theological "stronghold of liberal Christianity," it was heavily influenced by Boston liberalism. More than other regions of the state, which hired pastors from a number of different colleges, the Congregational pastors in the District of Maine came primarily from the bastion of Unitarianism, Harvard College. In large part, this was due to Maine's close proximity to, and close commercial ties with, Boston. Along with the latest goods from both Boston and Europe came the most recent trends in theology and philosophy. Portland served as the hub of Unitarianism in Maine, much as Boston did for Massachusetts, with secondary inroads made in those coastal communities that relied heavily on maritime trade and commerce for their livelihood. At the turn of the century, many, including the British Unitarian Theophilus Lindsey, believed that Portland would eventually rival Boston, not only in commerce, but also in theological liberalism.¹²

Among the leaders in this theological movement were two Maine theologians, Paul Coffin and Samuel Deane. Coffin served the Buxton Congregational church from 1763 to 1821, while Deane was pastor of the First Parish in Portland from 1764 to 1814. Both men graduated from Harvard (in 1759 and 1760 respectively) and were sustained in their views by an extensive network of friendships with other Harvard graduates. In theology, both started out as moderate Calvinists, but over time came to embrace a more rationalist, if not overtly Unitarian, theology. Coffin gradually came to embrace Arian views – denial of the divinity of Christ – but he never abandoned Trinitarian language in his sermons, nor did he try to persuade his congregation to alter its creed. Abhorring public controversy, he seemed content to hold his views in private. Deane also eventually came to embrace typical Liberal views, but, like Coffin, he was not forward with his theology. So reticent was Deane that even his close friends, including one of the deacons of his church, were unclear about his theological views on the controversial topics of the day.¹³ Perhaps this was why these two men had such long and prosperous ministries in their respective communities. Others were not as fortunate.



Reverend Samuel Deane was the pastor of the First Parish church in Portland from 1764 to 1814. A graduate of Harvard College, Deane was a theological Liberal, who quietly preached a Liberal Unitarianism to his congregants. Maine Historical Society Collections.

In the years leading up to the outbreak of the Unitarian Controversy in 1805, Boston area Liberals were quietly making great gains; the vast majority of churches that became Liberal did so without conflict.¹⁴ In Maine, by contrast, there were seven conflicts in six different churches during this period, and in all but one instance the Liberal pastor was ousted by the community (Table 1). The lone exception was Rev. Hugh Wallis, a strict Calvinist, who was dismissed by mutual consent from the church in Bath.¹⁵ Maine churches tolerated neither the extremes of Unitarianism nor the extremes of hyper-Calvinism.

Table 1: Church Splits in Maine, 1734-1805

Date	Church	Pastor	Conflict	Result
1785	Hallowell	William Hazlitt	Unitarianism	Pastor dismissed
1786	Hallowell	Isaac Foster	Arminianism	Pastor dismissed

1797	Biddeford	Nathaniel Webster	Arminianism	
			Free Thinkers	Pastor dismissed
1797	Machias	Clark Brown	Arminianism	Pastor dismissed
1800	Dunstan	Nathaniel Tilton	Liberalism	Pastor dismissed
1800	Bath	Hugh Wallis	Pastor's Calvinism	Pastor dismissed
1801	Lyman		Parish's Liberalism	Deacons blocked hiring of Liberal pastor

By the outbreak of the Unitarian Controversy in 1805, Maine, too, had experienced a drift into theological liberalism. The stories of Freeman and Oxnard, the founders of the first openly Unitarian churches, were not only similar, but they were linked by the common influence of English Unitarians like Lindsey, Priestly, and more directly by Hazlitt. On the other hand, unlike in Boston, Liberal sentiment in Maine met with stiff resistance, foreshadowing the trouble that was to come in Massachusetts. With the opening of the Unitarian Controversy in 1805, Maine Congregational churches, having already driven a number of Unitarians from their midst, took the lead in severing institutional relations with the Unitarians.

Maine's Role in the Institutional Separation, 1805 to 1815

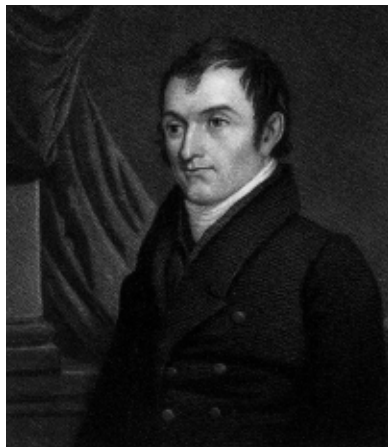
The church-parish split in Dorchester, Massachusetts (1808-1812), has generally been perceived as the signal clash in the institutional separation phase of the controversy because it illustrates the various institutional ways (pulpit exchanges, Christian fellowship, ecclesiastical councils, and church-parish relations) that Liberals and Orthodox cut ties with each other. The discord began with the ordination of the Rev. John Codman, a known theological conservative, as pastor of the Dorchester church in December 1808. Unitarians agreed to his appointment with the understanding that he would exchange pulpits with nearby pastors from the Liberal Boston Association. A year passed without a single exchange with any pastor other than with fellow Trinitarians. This led to a protest by the Unitarians and, when Codman persisted, a series of moves that culminated, in November 1812, with a vote to dismiss him as pastor. Because the parish paid the pastor's salary and controlled the church property, the Trinitarian members of the church were forced to buy out the pews of the dissenters to preserve their control over the church.¹⁶

While the Dorchester split was obviously important, a case can be

made that the conflict in Portland was the first clash in the battle for institutional separation. In the early 1800s, Portland was home to three Congregational churches. The First Parish, led by the Rev. Samuel Deane, was predominantly Liberal, while the Second Parish, formed from the First in 1788 over a financial dispute, was comprised of mostly Calvinists. In 1807, a second Calvinist parish (the Third) was organized by a breakaway faction of disgruntled parishioners and church members from the First Parish over the church's growing liberalism.¹⁷ That same year the First and Second Parish churches were looking to settle a younger associate to assist their pastors with their ministerial duties, and both set their sights on the promising young pastor Edward Payson. Payson was the son of Seth Payson, a New Hampshire minister and participant on the Calvinists' side in the controversy over the Hollis Professorship of Theology in the 1805. After considering offers from a number of churches in the region, Edward Payson settled on the offer made by the Second Parish. Preaching an unvarnished form of Calvinism, complete with a bold defense of the trinity, original sin, and the divinity of Christ, he proceeded to build the Second Parish into one of the largest and most prosperous churches in the District of Maine. However, Payson's success came with a price, as his sermons heightened tensions between the First and Second Parishes over their theological differences.¹⁸

Having failed to obtain the services of Payson, the First Parish then turned to a list of candidates that included many well known Unitarians, including Joseph McKean, Samuel Cary, and Samuel Thacher, but the man chosen by the church, with Deane's approval, was the Trinitarian John Codman. After preaching before the church in the fall of 1808, the church voted to settle him as the associate, only to have the parish vote 62 to 3 to reject him.¹⁹ Codman then moved on to the Dorchester church, where his Calvinism and his refusal to exchange pulpits with Liberals led to the conflict previously discussed. After rejecting Codman, the First Parish church called Ichabod Nichols to settle as their associate pastor in 1809. Nichols was a recent graduate of Harvard College and had studied theology with the Rev. Thomas Barnard of Salem. As if to make clear the theological preferences of the First Parish, the ordaining council called to install Nichols was comprised almost entirely of prominent Unitarian ministers from Boston and the surrounding region.²⁰ The only Orthodox minister offered a role in the ordination ceremony was Edward Payson. The inclusion of Payson was a token gesture designed to lessen the growing tension between the First Parish and Sec-

The son of a New Hampshire minister, Edward Payson was named an associate pastor in the Second Parish in Portland in 1807. Payson held firmly to his Calvinist beliefs during the Unitarian Controversy and helped make the Second Parish church one of the largest and most successful in the district of Maine. From Asa Cummings, *A Memoir of the Rev. Edward Payson, D.D.: Late Pastor of the Second Parish Church of Portland, Maine* (New York: American Tract Society, no date).



ond Parish, but Payson refused to participate without first hearing Nichols defend his theology before the ordination council. Upon completion of the examination, Payson pronounced Nichols' theology unacceptable and withdrew from the proceedings. For this, he was roundly condemned for his "bigoted, narrow, party views" by both the First Parish and some of his own congregation.²¹

With support in both churches for a symbolic gesture of unity, it would have been easy for Payson to participate in the ordination and win the approval of a majority of the community.²² However, once Nichols' Liberal views were known, Payson could not in good conscience participate in the ordination of a man whose theology would undermine his beliefs, and more importantly, those of his congregation. Therefore, he chose to withdraw from the ordination council.

Two years later, in 1811, Payson was the first pastor in Massachusetts (including the District of Maine) to openly implement an exclusive policy of pulpit exchange. The policy was made public when Payson refused to allow Nichols, who was scheduled to preach at the Second Parish during the annual session of the Cumberland Ministerial Association (CMA), to do so in his church. The association relented and a substitute was chosen. Following this incident, the young clergy pressed the moderates and Unitarians for a clear statement of beliefs for the CMA. The CMA had grappled with the Unitarian question as early as 1800 but failed to take a stand. With the coming of a new generation of theologians, led by Payson, a push was made to tighten up the theological requirements of the group. After years of debate, the group finally devised

a creedal statement in 1820 that required members to give their assent to the traditional formulations of the disputed doctrines, such as the Trinity, divine inspiration of scripture, and original sin, as a prerequisite to membership in the association. In response, the Liberal ministers, including Nichols, Nathaniel Tilton, Thomas Lancaster, and even the moderate Calvinist Elijah Kellogg, refused to sign the creed, and some withdrew as members the next year.²³

Such stands of theological integrity came at a great price. By 1809, Payson lamented the opposition in the community to his principled stand, and Unitarians distributed tracts and literature espousing their theological views, which would, according to Calvinists, “mislead young converts, and turn aside inquirers.” Opposition to Payson’s approach also came from within his own parish. Payson reached the limits of exclusion when he dismissed his congregation with a curse from the apostles that, “if any man loves not our Lord Jesus Christ, let him be an Anathema Maranatha.” This obvious condemnation of Unitarians was not well received and led to the defection of a small number of his church and the creation of a new Congregational church. Although Payson did not repeat the curse, it does lend insight into the tenacity with which he held to his theological views.²⁴

Traditional focus on the neighborhood of Boston as the battlefield for the Unitarian Controversy has obscured historians’ perspective on the origins of the move for institutional separation. Although the Dorchester and Portland controversies occurred relatively close in time, it appears that Payson’s refusal to participate on Nichols’ ordaining council was the first in a number of institutional reformulations.²⁵ Likewise, it appears that his public refusal to exchange pulpits was also in advance of Codman’s efforts in Dorchester. Codman’s refusal to exchange did not become public until he was called before an ecclesiastical council in November 1811. Payson was more forthright, publicly refusing to exchange pulpits with Nichols in May 1811. Thus, it seems clear that Portland, and not Dorchester, was the signal case for the Institutional Separation.

The Nature of Church-Parish Splits in Maine, 1805-1833

In many ways, the church-parish splits in Maine differed little from those in Massachusetts. From 1805 to 1833, nearly a dozen Maine churches split over theology (Table 2).

Table 2: Church Splits in Maine, 1805-1833

DATE	CHURCH	Pastor	Conflict	Result
1807	First Parish Portland	Samuel Deane	Pastor's Liberalism	Faction breaks over Liberal preaching
1807	Third Parish Portland		Outsiders	Third Parish formed
1809	Union	None settled	Outsiders	Orthodox seceded
1816	Belfast First	William Frothingham	Pastor's Liberalism	Orthodox seceded
1817	Kennebunk First	Nathaniel H. Fletcher	Pastor's Liberalism	Orthodox seceded
1817	Biddeford	John Turner	Pastor's Calvinism	Pastor dismissed
1820	Castine First	William Mason	Trinity & election Outsiders	Orthodox seceded
1820	Eastport	Andrew Bigelow	Baptists Outsiders	Orthodox seceded
1823	Hallowell	C.C. Everett	No controversy	Liberal church established
1824	Biddeford/ Saco	Thomas Tracy	Pastor's Liberalism	Liberal church (moved to Saco)
1828	Kennebunk- port	John Fessenden	Pastor's Calvinism	Pastor dismissed
1829	Standish	Thomas Tenney	Pastor's Liberalism	Orthodox seceded

In most cases, a Liberal parish imposed its will on an Orthodox church. In two cases, Biddeford and Kennebunkport, the parish forced the dismissal of an overly-zealous Orthodox minister. In four cases – Eastport, Belfast, Union, and Biddeford – the parish forced the majority of the church members to leave by usurping the duty to choose the pastor.²⁶ In at least four cases – First Parish Portland, Hallowell, Kennebunk, and Standish – the minister was ordained under the assumption that he was a Trinitarian Congregationalist, but over time, he became more liberal, taking the majority of the parish with him.²⁷ Similar events occurred in Massachusetts, but despite some similarities, there were important differences between the conflicts in Maine and Massachusetts.

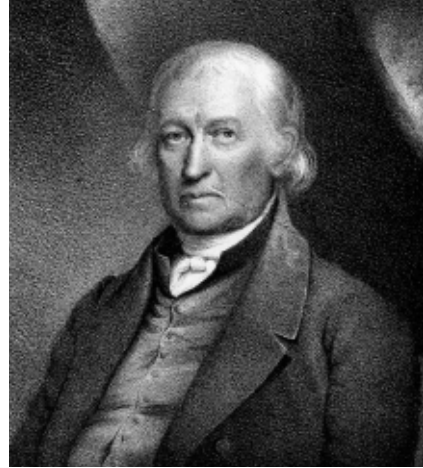
The most important distinction was the nature and timing of the divisions between church and parish. By the end of the Unitarian Contro-

versy, 135 of 544 Congregational churches in Massachusetts had become Unitarian. Of that number, only thirteen became Unitarian before the 1820 Dedham decision. The clear implication is that the verdict of the court emboldened Unitarians to aggressively push their views on Trinitarian church members, knowing that the latter would secede, leaving control of the church and church property behind, rather than sit under what they perceived to be erroneous theological preaching.²⁸ While the Dedham decision accelerated the conflict between Unitarians and Trinitarians in Massachusetts, it was largely irrelevant in Maine. The majority of Maine churches that became Unitarian did so before the Dedham decision. In part, this was due to the separation of Maine from Massachusetts in 1820, which lessened the effect of that court decision in Maine. However, this does not account for the fact that most of Maine's Unitarian separations took place years in advance of those in Massachusetts. Maine's lead in this matter can be accounted for by its rural conditions and the impact that those conditions had on religious life.

Because of its frontier conditions, the "quasi-religious establishment" was dysfunctional in all but the most settled regions of Maine, and in many Maine towns, raising money to build a church and support a pastor was a significant undertaking; this lack of finances often weighed heavily in the theological conflict between church and parish. In a number of instances, such as in the churches of Biddeford/Saco, Kennebunkport, and Kennebunk, disputes over money and church building seemed to be as important in splitting the local churches as Liberal theology.²⁹

In addition to the problem of money was the rise of sectarianism. Poverty and isolation could be overcome, one Congregationalist missionary astutely observed, if the people would unite to support a settled minister, but the question was what kind of minister should they unite behind?³⁰ From 1780 to 1820, the Congregational churches in Maine saw their collective status steadily decline from a nearly unassailable majority to a struggling minority. By 1820, the Baptists and Methodists outnumbered the Congregationalists by nearly three to one. As one historian put it, the "old system of town-supported churches could not accommodate the religious diversity" spreading throughout the District.³¹ Recent immigrants into Maine were drawn from the humbler ranks of society and were products of the New Light Stir of 1774-1784 – an intense period of revival on the New England frontier – which meant they were more likely to be Methodists or Baptists than Congregationalists. Relying on circuit riders and lay exhorters, the Baptists and Methodists were able to reach the unchurched on the frontier long before the Congregationalists, who

Reverend Jotham Sewall was a stationed missionary in Maine in the early nineteenth century who preached traditional Calvinism to numerous congregations throughout the district and later state of Maine. From Jotham Sewall, *A Memoir of Rev. Jotham Sewall, of Chesterville, Maine* (Boston: Tappan & Whittemore, 1853).



relied on settled ministers to propagate the faith. Drawn from the ranks of the common people, Baptist and Methodist preachers also had the advantage of greater solidarity with the backwoods farmers than the Congregationalist ministers who were drawn primarily from the middle and upper classes.³² This sectarian division made it difficult to marshal support for a settled minister, even when there was sufficient population to support it. Members of the dissenting denominations were loathe to raise funds to support a church not of their own choosing, and in many communities a consensus could not be reached when it came time to build a church or pay the salary of a pastor.³³

Increased sectarian competition put pressure on the Congregationalists to establish a missionary presence in the District of Maine. Congregationalists had long feared that the Maine frontier would become a haven for infidelity. As Eliphalet Gillet of the Massachusetts Missionary Society put it in 1818, Maine was in dire need of help, as “deceived and deceiving men” were “putting themselves forth as public teachers, while they themselves need to be taught what be the first principles of the oracles of God.”³⁴ As a result, Congregationalists in Massachusetts came together at the beginning of the nineteenth century to form voluntary societies like the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, the Evangelical Missionary Society, and the Massachusetts Missionary Society to send missionaries to preach the gospel in the isolated places of the District.³⁵ The leading figures of these missionary societies were also zealous Calvinists and founders of Bangor Theological Seminary, which was started shortly after Andover Theological Seminary to provide orthodox theological training of ministers in Maine.³⁶

These men also were dedicated to the preservation of traditional Christian doctrine and to the extermination of Unitarian thinking in the Congregational churches of Maine.

In 1807, Maine churches organized their own society, the Maine Missionary Society, and embarked on a unique strategy of supporting a “stationed missionary” in the sparsely-populated area. This missionary would reside in a fixed location and travel to surrounding communities to provide ministerial services. Unlike itinerant missionaries or preachers who passed through a region at regular intervals, a “stationed missionary” was always available to meet the needs of the region he served.³⁷ Under these circumstances, it was easy for a disaffected minority in a community to seek the support of clerical outsiders in times of theological dispute. When this happened, an already theologically charged atmosphere turned increasingly bitter. In at least five instances – Eastport, Union, Kennebunk, Castine and the First Parish Portland – the trouble between church and parish was initiated or inflamed by outside forces.³⁸ One of the leading instigators was Jotham Sewall, a staunch defender of Calvinism. In addition to providing sound Trinitarian preaching to the churches that he served, he was also instrumental in encouraging Calvinist minorities to break from churches in Portland, Union, and Castine when Unitarians took control.³⁹ Sometimes interference came from a settled minister. In 1817, the Rev. Jonathan Greenleaf of Wells created a stir with an anonymous letter to his Liberal colleague in Kennebunk, Nathaniel Fletcher, accusing him of professing one set of beliefs to the area clergy while preaching another to his congregation. In part, the conflict was personal, but it was a matter of theological integrity as well. This exchange poisoned relations between the two churches, which ended pulpit exchanges and led to the defection of a small faction of Fletcher’s church.

As is the case for many aspects of Maine’s history, frontier conditions gave the Unitarian Controversy a unique flavor. In Massachusetts, the conflict between church and parish took place within the confines of a particular town and, whether it was over the calling of a pastor or his practice of pulpit exchange, the conflict was usually about theology. In Maine, church-parish conflicts were more complicated. Maine’s poor, rural conditions rendered the Standing Order dysfunctional and provided fertile ground for the rising sectarian competition with Baptists and Methodists. The churches were comprised mainly of poor, uneducated settlers who ignored the finer points of theology and clung to the essentials of their faith – and thus were quick to spot innovations in doctrine that altered the fundamentals of “true” religion. Should the parish-

ioners fail to detect these shifts, the settled Calvinist missionaries were quick to draw their attention to these facts. These forces combined to make religion in Maine more competitive than it was in Massachusetts and Mainers more combative in their theological relations.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the humble churches of Maine played a bellwether role in one of the great church conflicts in American history. Following the Great Awakening, compared to the Boston area clergy, a sizeable number of Maine clergy participated in the drift toward Liberalism. However, when that Liberalism was made known, Maine parishioners were far less receptive than were their counterparts in the Boston region. Foreshadowing the conflict and animosity experienced by Massachusetts churches in the early decades of the nineteenth century, Mainers' initial response was to rid their parishes of Unitarian ministers. Later, when Unitarianism began to take hold, and churches and parishes clashed over the choice of a minister, Mainers took the lead in the institutional separation of the Unitarians and Trinitarians. These contributions add not only to our understanding of the religious history of Maine, they also deepen our understanding of the Unitarian Controversy in general. The conflict in Maine was more than an echo of a distant thunder; it was an integral part of the broader Unitarian Controversy.

NOTES

1. George Punchard, *History of Congregationalism From About A.D. 250 to the Present Time*, vol. 5 (Boston: Congregational Publishing Society, 1881), p. 661; Stephen A. Marini, "Religious Revolution in the District of Maine, 1780-1820," in *Maine in the Early Republic: From Revolution to Statehood*, ed., Charles E. Clark, James S. Leamon, and Karen Bowden (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1988), table 3, p. 120.

2. The standard treatment of this period is Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1955).

3. See Charles C. Forman, "Elected Now By Time: The Unitarian Controversy, 1805-1835" in *A Stream of Light: A Sesquicentennial History of American Unitarianism*, ed. Conrad Wright (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1975), pp. 3-8; George Willis Cooke, *Unitarianism in America: A History of Its Origins and Development* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1902), 55-73. For the social makeup of this group, consult Anne C. Rose, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830-1850* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 1-28; and Mary Kupiac Cayton, "Who Were the Evangelicals: Conservative and Liberal Identity in the Unitarian Controversy in Boston, 1804-1833," *Journal of Social History* (Fall 1997): 85-107.

4. Joseph W. Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse and New England Congregationalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), pp. 129-140. For a brief overview of Morse's role, see Conrad Wright, "The Controversial Career of Jedidiah Morse," in *The Unitarian Controversy: Essays on American Unitarian History* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1994), pp. 59-82.
5. Conrad Wright, "Institutional Reconstruction in the Unitarian Controversy," in *American Unitarianism, 1805-1865*, ed., Conrad Edick Wright (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society and University Press of New England, 1989), pp. 3-29.
6. For a brief overview see Forman, "Elected Now by Time," pp. 20-26; Frank Hugh Foster, *A Genetic History of the New England Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1907), pp. 273-315; Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), pp. 31-45; Joseph Haroutunian, *Piety Versus Moralism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1932), pp. 177-219; H. Shelton Smith, *Changing Conceptions of Original Sin* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), pp. 68-85; Bruce M. Stephens, *God's Last Metaphor* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).
7. Wright, "Institutional Reconstruction in the Unitarian Controversy," 3-29. For background on *Baker v. Fales*, see Conrad Wright, "The Dedham Case Revisited," in *The Unitarian Controversy*, 111-135.
8. Cooke, *Unitarianism in America*, 124-154.
9. Calvin Montague Clark includes a chapter on the controversy in his *History of the Congregational Churches of Maine*, vol. 2 (Portland: Congregational Christian Conference of Maine, 1935), pp. 357-372.
10. Throughout this essay, the terms Liberal and Unitarian will be used interchangeably to designate Unitarianism, as will Orthodox, Trinitarian, and Calvinists to signify those who stood for traditional theology within the Congregational Church.
11. Cooke, *Unitarianism in America*, pp. 80-81; Thomas Belsham, *Memoirs of the late Reverend Theophilus Lindsey, M.A.* (1812; reprint edition, London: Williams and Norgate, 1873), pp. 158-159; William Willis, *Journals of the Rev. Thomas Smith and the Rev. Samuel Deane, Pastors of the First Church in Portland, with Notes and Biographical Notices: and a Summary History of Portland* (Portland: Joseph S. Bailey, 1849), pp. 378-379.
12. Richard M. Candee, "Maine Towns, Maine People: Architecture and Community, 1783-1820," in *Maine in the Early Republic*, pp. 50, 53; Joyce Butler, "Family & Community Life, 1783-1861," in *Maine: The Pine Tree State from Prehistory to the Present*, eds., Richard W. Judd, Edwin A. Churchill, and Joel Eastman (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1995), pp. 222-227; Belsham, *Memoirs of the late Reverend Theophilus Lindsey, M.A.*, p. 248.
13. Clark, *History of the Congregational Churches of Maine*, vol. 2, pp. 111-112, 358-359; Wright, *Beginnings of Unitarianism in America*, p. 255; "Art. III. Unitarianism in Portland," pp. 34-35; Willis, *Journals*, pp. 297-299; Cyrus Woodman, "Memoir of the Rev. Paul Coffin, D.D.," *Collections of the Maine Historical Society*, 1st Series, vol. 4 (1856): 251-256.

14. Wright, *Beginnings of Unitarianism in America*, pp. 253-255.
15. Among the leaders of the opposition was former pastor Francis Winter. See Reed, *History of Bath and Environs*, p. 482; Sewall, "History of Bath," pp. 225-226.
16. William Allen, *Memoir of John Codman, D.D.* (Boston: T.R. Marvin and S.K. Whipple & Co., 1853), pp. 68-92; Wright, "Institutional Reconstruction in the Unitarian Controversy," pp. 8-17; Asa Cummings, *Memoir, Select Thoughts and Sermons of the Late Rev. Edward Payson, D.D.*, vol. 1 (Portland: Hyde and Lord, 1849), pp. 128-129.
17. William Willis, *The History of Portland, from 1632 to 1864: With a Notice of Previous Settlements, Colonial Grants, and Changes of Government in Maine* (Portland: Bailey & Noyes, 1865), p. 664.
18. "Art. III. Unitarianism in Portland," pp. 34, 37-38; Cummings, *Memoir*, vol. 1, pp. 127-129, 159-161.
19. Willis, *The History of Portland*, pp. 652-653; "Art. III. Unitarianism in Portland," pp. 35-37; Cummings, *Memoir*, vol. 1, pp. 127-128; Willis, *Journals of the Rev. Thomas Smith and the Rev. Samuel Deane*, p. 395.
20. The Unitarians on the council were Thomas Barnard, John Lathrop, J.T. Kirkland, Joseph Stevens Buckminster, Samuel Cary, and Abiel Abott.
21. Willis, *The History of Portland*, pp. 297-298; "Art. III. Unitarianism in Portland," 35-37; Willis, *Journals*, pp. 396-397; Cummings, *Memoir*, pp. 180-183.
22. Cummings, *Memoir*, vol. 1, p. 136.
23. *The Centennial of the Cumberland Association of Congregational Ministers, at the Second Parish Church in Portland, Maine, Monday and Tuesday, May 28 and 29, 1888* (Portland: B. Thurston & Co., 1888), pp. 35-37.
24. Cummings, *Memoir*, vol. 1, p. 187; Isaac Weston, *Our Pastor; or Reminiscences of Rev. Edward Payson, D.D.* (Boston: Tappan & Whittemore, 1855), p. 314; Willis, *The History of Portland*, pp. 664-667.
25. Wright, "Institutional Reconstruction in the Unitarian Controversy," pp. 6-14.
26. Clark, *History of the Congregational Churches of Maine*, vol. 2, pp. 251-252, 312-314, 332-334, 359-365, 367-70; William Henry Kilby, *Eastport and Passamaquoddy* (Eastport, ME: Edward E. Shead & Company, 1882), pp. 313-317, 346-351; George Folsom, *History of Saco and Biddeford* (Saco, ME: Alex G. Putnam, 1839), pp. 293-294; Joseph Williamson, *History of the City of Belfast in the State of Maine, From its First Settlement in 1770 to 1875* (Portland: Loring, Short, and Harmon, 1877), pp. 267-268, 276-285.
27. Clark, *History of the Congregational Churches of Maine*, vol. 2, pp. 252, 366-367, 369-371; Emma Huntington Nason, *Old Hallowell on the Kennebec, 1845-1921* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1989), p. 206.
28. Joseph S. Clark, *A Historical Sketch of the Congregational Churches of Massachusetts, From 1620 to 1858* (Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1858), pp. 270, 272; Wright, "The Dedham Case Revisited," p. 113.

29. Clark, *History of the Congregational Churches of Maine*, vol. 2, pp. 333-334, 362-363, 365, 371-372.
30. "Report of the Trustees of the Massachusetts Missionary Society," *The Panoplist, and Missionary Magazine* (July 1817): 331-332.
31. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 113.
32. Marini, "Religious Revolution in the District of Maine, 1780-1820," pp. 128-130, 134; Alan Taylor, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), pp. 131-139.
33. The separation of Maine from Massachusetts in 1820 put an end the matter once and for all. The Maine Constitution contained a Bill of Rights with a generous grant of religious freedom and no establishment clause. See Ronald F. Banks, *Maine Becomes a State: The Movement to Separate Maine from Massachusetts, 1785-1820* (Portland: Maine Historical Society, 1973), pp. 154-156.
34. "Report of the Trustees of the Massachusetts Missionary Society," *The Panoplist, and Missionary Magazine* (September 1813): 188; "Report of the Trustees of the Massachusetts Missionary Society," *The Panoplist, and Missionary Magazine* (June 1818): 273.
35. Urgent appeals by the trustees of the Massachusetts Missionary Society for missionary support can be found throughout this period in the pages of *The Panoplist*. For a sampling of these reports see February 1807, pp. 434-435; June 1812, pp. 34-35; July 1814, p. 328.
36. Leading figures included Jotham Sewall, John Sawyer, Mighill Blood, Eliphalet Gillet, and Kiah Bayley. See Calvin Montague Clark, *History of Bangor Theological Seminary* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1916), pp. 14-18.
37. Marvin Monroe Deems, *The Maine Missionary Society, 1807-1957* (Portland: Marks Printing House, 1957), pp. 2-8.
38. Clark, *History of the Congregational Churches of Maine*, vol. 2, pp. 252, 323-324, 359, 363-365, 368-370.
39. Clark, *History of the Congregational Churches of Maine*, vol. 2, pp. 252, 323-324, 365, 368-369; George Augustus Wheeler, *History of Castine, Penobscot, and Brooksville, Maine; Including the Ancient Settlement of Pentaoet* (Bangor: Burr & Robinson, 1875), pp. 126-128. For a sketch of his life see: Jotham Sewall, *A Memoir of Rev. Jotham Sewall, of Chesterville, Maine* (Boston: Tappan & Whittemore, 1853).