



1871

Unitarian Universalist Society of Wellesley Hills



1888



1929



1960

engravings by Margaret Fitzwilliam

A Liberal Religious Community Since 1871

Written by Marc Shechtman in 2005. Revised and updated in 2021

Earliest Beginnings

The history of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Wellesley Hills is closely tied to the history of the town of Wellesley, Massachusetts. In fact, the town and Society share many of the same founders. Both the Society and the town were forming at a time, following the American Civil War, when independent thinkers were questioning many older institutions and conventional values in American society. Over time, the town and the Unitarian Universalist Society of Wellesley Hills (UUSWH) have experienced change together, each experiencing periods of rapid and even burdensome growth in numbers — both nearly doubled in size during the years following both World Wars — and also periods of decline and contraction.

Often, our congregation has been nurtured by leaders in liberal religion and progressive movements. Some of the most famous names in the Unitarian Universalist history, including James Luther Adams, Charles Potter, Waitstill Sharp, and William Rice have ministered to our congregation and inspired our members. We also like to think that these prophetic figures also found inspiration from us! In other eras, our congregation has gained strength from more pastoral ministers who focused more on spiritual development and personal growth rather than larger societal concerns and denominational affairs.

The process of establishing and defining our purpose as a UU congregation has been a continuous challenge over the years, but it has been a challenge that several generations have embraced with real enthusiasm and considerable dedication.

In 2016, UUSWH voted to adopt the following mission statement:

Our mission is to build a community of faith that inspires spiritual growth, just and responsible action, and lives of compassion, purpose, and hope.

These sentiments may sound quite familiar, as they give us the language for the chalice lighting with which we begin our worship service every Sunday.

VIEW OF WELLESLEY HILLS - Circa 1890
Washington Street and Worcester Turnpike (Route 9) intersection.
Unitarian Society Steeple visible at center left



This congregation emerged following a split with the local Congregational church in the years after the American Civil War. Many residents of what was then the Grantville section of Needham found themselves dissatisfied with what was then known as the Orthodox Congregational Church of Grantville (now known as Hills Church - Congregational). Although the nearest Unitarian congregation was less than three miles away in Needham, it did not seem to provide the community experience the earliest members of our Society were seeking. In 1869, sixty-seven residents of Grantville formed a committee to establish their own congregation and founded the Unitarian Society of Grantville with institutional support from the American Unitarian Association (AUA).

Like many independent thinkers of the time, these men and women, civic and intellectual leaders in the area, were heavily influenced by the post-bellum intellectual furor sweeping America. New religious ideas that had been developing for several decades in Boston were now being hotly debated even in small towns and local churches. These included transcendentalism, rationalism, women's rights, spiritualism, and evolution, as well as other lively topics of general discussion.

Another factor that may have figured in our split with local Congregationalists may not have been entirely ecclesiastical. Unitarian Universalist historian Rev. Mark Harris, in his seminal work "Elite: Uncovering Classicism in Unitarian Universalist History," points out that at this point in the nineteenth century "Unitarians controlled all the educational, social, economic, and political power in Boston." Harris suggests that exclusivity was a hallmark and that Unitarians used their wealth and power to create "a number of cultural institutions, but they kept them private..." Unitarians dominated the intellectual and philanthropic organizations in Boston such as the Boston Athenaeum, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and Harvard Divinity School.

Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Be it Known That whereas Charles Gaoett, Eliska Lismore, John W. Shaw, George A. Nowison, Olin C. Lismore, Oliver Smith, Charles A. Dillaway, David C. Perrin, Josiah A. Osgood, Isaac Sprague, S. Harris Austin, Rebecca Eaton and Louisa E. Austin, have associated themselves with the intention of forming a corporation under the name of the

Unitarian Society of Braintree

for the purpose of the worship of God and general religious purposes and the holding of church property, therefore

with a capital of

and have complied with the provisions of the Statutes of this Commonwealth in such case made and provided, as appears from the certificate of the ^{Moderator} ~~President~~, Treasurer, and ^{Standing Committee} ~~Directors~~ of said corporation duly approved by the Commissioner of Corporations, and recorded in this office.

Now, Therefore, I, HENRY B. PEIRCE, Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, **DO HEREBY CERTIFY** that said C. Gaoett, E. Lismore, J. W. Shaw, G. A. Nowison, O. C. Lismore, O. Smith, C. A. Dillaway, D. C. Perrin, J. A. Osgood, I. Sprague, S. H. Austin, R. Eaton and L. E. Austin, their associates and successors, are legally organized and established as and are hereby made an existing corporation under the name of the *Unitarian Society of Braintree* with the powers, rights, and privileges, and subject to the limitations, duties, and restrictions, which by law appertain thereto.

WITNESS my official signature hereunto subscribed, and the seal of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts hereunto affixed this second day of *January* in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and seventy-eight

Melinda H. Rice.

Henry B. Peirce,
Secretary of the Commonwealth.

Unitarians were replacing Congregationalists as the leading lights in Boston, and as transportation was bringing wealthy and influential Bostonians to Wellesley, a connection to a distinct religious identity was needed. Many of our Society founders maintained professional offices and connections in Boston. In particular, the Hunnewell family remained deeply connected with the influential Arlington Street Unitarian Church in the Back Bay. A chapel in the Arlington Street Church is dedicated to the memory of Horatio Hollis Hunnewell whose estate, Wellesley, would become the namesake of the town.

Although the members of the Unitarian Society of Grantville had been meeting since 1869, they did not incorporate with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts until February 27th, 1871. Incorporation documents state the purpose of the Society is the “worship of God and general religious purposes, and the holding of church property.” Due to technical issues, the Society had to be incorporated again in 1878, and once more in 1881 when it changed its name to the Unitarian Society of Wellesley Hills. The designation of Wellesley Hills was used in a way similar to the second Congregational church, the Hills congregation, establishing that Grantville was becoming a significant center.

The relationship between the new Unitarian Society and the established Congregational churches in the area was friendly and cooperative, if still somewhat competitive. The minister of the Congregational Society was a speaker at the dedication of the new Unitarian building in 1888. During the winter of 1918, when heating oil was rationed in World War I, our congregation accepted an invitation to use the facilities of the nearby Congregational church and donate the fuel savings to the war effort.

The success of the new Unitarian Society of Grantville may well have encouraged other local residents to break away from another institution — the Town of Needham — and to establish their own town government for Wellesley. Many of the town's founders, including Joseph E. Fiske, John W. Shaw, and Isaac Sprague, were members of our society. In 1880 they petitioned the Massachusetts state legislature for the right to separate from Needham and create a new municipality. The fact that the Grantville Unitarian Society was operating independently from the Needham parish demonstrated another area in which little was binding the two communities together.

Several of the founding members were free-thinkers and veterans of the abolitionist and women's suffrage movements of the nineteenth century. Several members were established business leaders and powerful land-owning families in the area. Several members had close ties with Boston and others had deep roots in Needham.

Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Be it Known That whereas Charles Gasett, Elisha Livermore, John W. Shaw, George A. Howison, Ohio C. Livermore, Oliver Smith, Charles A. Dillaway, David C. Perrin, Josiah A. Osgood, Isaac Sprague, S. Harris Austin, Rebecca Eaton and Louisa E. Austin, have associated themselves with the intention of forming a corporation under the name of the

Unitarian Society of Braintree
for the purpose of the worship of God and general religious purposes and the holding of church property therefor
with a capital of
and have complied with the provisions of the Statutes of this Commonwealth in such case made and provided, as appears from the certificate of the ^{Governor}~~President~~, Treasurer, and ^{Standing Committee}~~Directors~~ of said corporation duly approved by the Commissioner of Corporations, and recorded in this office:

Now, Therefore, I, HENRY B. PEIRCE, Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, **DO HEREBY CERTIFY** that said C. Gasett, E. Livermore, J. W. Shaw, G. A. Howison, O. C. Livermore, O. Smith, C. A. Dillaway, D. C. Perrin, J. A. Osgood, I. Sprague, S. H. Austin, R. Eaton and L. E. Austin, their associates and successors, are legally organized and established as and are hereby made an existing corporation under the name of the Unitarian Society of Braintree with the powers, rights, and privileges, and subject to the limitations, duties, and restrictions, which by law appertain thereto.

WITNESS my official signature herunto subscribed, and the seal of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts herunto affixed this second day of January in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and seventy-eight

Melinda A. Rice.

Henry B. Peirce,
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John and Mary Sawyer were transcendentalists who had moved to Grantville when the famous Brook Farm experiment in communal living in Roxbury was disbanded. They have been described by historian Beth Hinchliffe as the "most unusual" area residents because their friends and visitors included prominent radicals of their day, among them Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Ellery Channing, Charles Sumner, and John Greenleaf Whittier.

Another free thinker joining in the Society was Miss Sarah Southwick, described by town historian Gameleil Bradford as having "burning energy and convictions." She "worked persistently for the emancipation of women, above all she gave her life to the abolition of slavery. She was a bit of idealism incarnate."

John Shaw, one of the original members of the Grantville Unitarian Society, served on the first Board of Selectman in Wellesley. The bell tower in nearby Elm Park is dedicated in part to him. Alvin Fuller, the Postmaster in the area, was also an early supporter of the society.

Isaac Sprague—a world famous painter who traveled and collaborated with naturalist John James Audubon—had a substantial family involvement in real estate and was instrumental in founding both the Society and town.

Another early supporter of the Society, although never a member, was H. H. Hunnewell, who twice donated \$2,500, quite a substantial amount then, to the fledgling congregation. But his family maintained close ties to the Arlington Street Unitarian Church in Boston.

For the first ten years of existence, a small industrial building, Maugus Hall, served as our church building. The hall was originally built as a railroad depot before the Civil War and had previously served as a school and community center for Grantville. The Society purchased the building and grounds from John Shaw for \$1,644.04, but required \$1,379.61 to turn the old building into a functioning facility.

"...when Maugus Hall was chosen as their place of worship it was the only public gathering place in the village, and after the church was organized some of the members did not wish it used for anything but their own meetings. A lively time and some friction ensued, but it was finally settled, and in 1871 the building was bought by the Society, and used by them until 1888, when the present church was erected." - John E. Fiske, 1917

A minister from the nearby First Parish in Needham, Rev. Albert Buell Vorse, was hired by the Society and served here until his death in 1899.

Although the Society has from time to time resorted to mortgages and debt, when the conversion to a sanctuary was completed UUSWH treasurer Rebecca Eaton could proudly report:

"Your treasurer feels she can congratulate the Unitarian Society of Grantville for the complete success which has attended their effort. So grave were the doubts as to our accomplishment...(But) we have bought and paid for this house and land...we have repaired and furnished it...we have paid the minister's salary. We are entirely free from debt."

One historian of the town of Wellesley in 1929 stated: "If the Unitarian Church is a flourishing and successful institution today, Miss Eaton should always be remembered as prominently instrumental." That treasurer, it is interesting to note, is also the aunt of Isaac Sprague, another instrumental member.

Establishing a Presence in Wellesley

In 1888, the Society erected a new main sanctuary, a rustic stone building which now houses our religious education classrooms and a small chapel. . The architects were asked to design a building in the style of an English country church and to "have it fit nicely into the village and not be imposing." A good deal of the funding for the new building came from H.H. Hunnewell, a major influence on the growth of Wellesley, having donated the town hall, library, and park system.



Hunnewell had requested that the architects run their plans by him before final approval and although no mention of a cross appears in the discussions of the building committee (they appear to have discussed everything else), it has long been speculated that the Celtic cross design (a cross with a circle around the center) on the steeple was created to satisfy Hunnewell's taste. Since the congregation at that time was described by a denominational official as “distinctly Christian”, it seems likely that a steeple would carry a cross, but whether or not the Celtic cross design characterized by a circle around the center of the cross was Hunnewell's particular contribution remains a mystery.

The firm selected to design the building, Rotch and Tilden, was then one of New England's pre-eminent architectural firms, according to a 1970 architectural history. The firm designed religious, academic, and public buildings and had ties to Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; it was also working on buildings at Williams and Wellesley Colleges.

The Wellesley Courant, predecessor of the Townsman, reported on the dedication of our building, noting that the architects were:

“very successful in presenting a structure that is massive, imposing, and ornamental, though they were somewhat restricted by the moderate limits of the building fund. This led to simplicity of construction and the use of

bowlders (sic) from the neighboring fields for building stone, which gives a certain dignity to the edifice which would be easily lost in any attempt to make a small building an imitation of a large one."

The article concludes: "An impression of solidity is given by the massive masonry and the broad spreading slate roof, relieved by a picturesque belfry recalling the small churches of Normandy."

During the year of construction, the congregation met in the sanctuary of the Hills Congregational Church on Sunday afternoons. The older building was not demolished, but moved to 58 Forest Street where it was converted into "Miss Croswell's Nursery School" before it was torn down in the 1950s.

In 1890 the first parsonage for the Society was completed at the southeast corner of Washington and Forest Streets. A few years later a more convenient home for the minister was bought at 310 Washington Street, directly opposite the church, near the present Green's Hardware store. In 1941 this building was moved around the corner to 10 Maugus Avenue. By 1966, the role of a parsonage in the life of the church had changed and the large Victorian mansion was sold to allow other housing arrangements for the minister.

Our first minister, Rev. Albert Vorse, provided stable leadership in the formative years of the Society. His tenure of 28 years is the longest of the dozen settled ministers who have since followed him. Gameliel Bradford, in his 1929 history "Early Days in Wellesley" writes that Rev. Vorse "was quiet, reserved, and seemed almost shy. He was not an especially brilliant preacher. But there was an atmosphere of peculiar, intimate, utterly unpretentious sanctity about him, which impressed even a childhood so indifferent and so erratic as mine."

Bradford notes that

"the life of the church in those days was full of activity. A course of lectures, together with coffee parties through the winter months, a two-to-three-days fair, usually held in a tent on the lawn beside the chapel, a mid-summer picnic...were always events in which the whole community were interested and all of which affairs augmented the church finances."

Census Year	Population	Change %
1900	5,072	
1910	5,413	7%
1920	6,224	15%
1930	11,439	84%
1940	15,127	32%
1950	20,549	36%
1960	26,071	27%
1970	28,051	8%
1980	27,209	-3%
1990	26,615	-2%
2000	27,046	2%
2010	27,982	3%
2020	28,747	3%

The years following WWI saw staggering growth in Wellesley.



Interior of the original stone building, in a photo taken circa 1925 before Hatch Rose Window installed. The Parish Hall addition in 1929 was built in similar style with dark wood panelling and circular light fixtures. Some items from this sanctuary including the lectern, hymn board, and Hatch Rose window (1929) would be transferred to the new sanctuary building in 1960.

Years of Significant Growth

The Unitarian Society of Grantville grew as the town of Wellesley developed from a rural community to an important suburb of Boston. The area, long known for the Elm Park Hotel, once a rural retreat for wealthy Bostonians, was turning from the village of Grantville to an economic and transportation center known as Wellesley Hills.

By 1917, Joseph E. Fiske could write in his history of the town that the Unitarian Society "shares about equally with the Congregational Society in the newcomers to the community."

By the start of the Twentieth Century, cattle were no longer being driven down Washington Street in front of our building on the way to the stockyards in Brighton. The industrial revolution and immigration policies were changing the settlement patterns in the area. The hotel went through a period of decline as trains and trolleys were now passing by on both sides of the church and the hotel. The hotel was acquired by the town and was demolished in 1908 to create Elm Park.

As the town of Wellesley grew in a somewhat haphazard but steady manner, so too did the Unitarian Society of Wellesley Hills. In 1891 the Annual Report states that “sixty-three families attend with some degree of regularity.” The Annual Report of 1900 states a yearly growth of 16 members, bringing the total to 128 members; it notes that “since our new pastor was installed, we have found it hard to satisfy constant demand for additional seating.” A 1901 letter to the board reports that there are 91 “scholars” in the Sunday School, with eight regular teachers and three substitutes. But the 1912 Annual Report noted a serious decline in contributors between 1907 and 1911, a steady drop over the four-year period. However, a record of 82 contributors was recorded in 1912.

As economic stability returned after World War I, both the town and the Society saw a growth spurt that has never been duplicated. In October 1929, ground was broken for the much-needed Parish House to adjoin the 1888 church building and provide space for social and educational activities.

While Rev. Vorse, our first minister, served for 28 years here, the following 28 years would see four different ministers arrive at the church. One of shortest terms for a minister was that of peripatetic Rev. Charles Potter, who led two Baptist and three Unitarian churches before arriving in Wellesley. He would eventually head several major congregations in New York. It is not clear why Potter left Wellesley so quickly, but it is clear that Potter was a person of vision and drive.

As minister of the West Side Unitarian Church in New York City, Rev. Potter gained national attention as the biblical consultant to Clarence Darrow in the famous “Scopes Monkey Trial” of 1925. In 1929 he founded the First Humanist Society of New York, whose advisory board included Julian Huxley, John Dewey, Albert Einstein, and Thomas Mann. Several years later Potter would recall, “I had given up my fast dwindling belief in the deity of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity,” he wrote. “Now, fifteen years later, I was leaving not only Christianity— if Unitarianism is Christianity —but Theism as well.”

A long and stable ministry would not come until 1920, with the arrival of Rev. Walter Samuel Swisher. Rev. Swisher managed the growth spurt that followed World War I. Post-war prosperity led to major improvements, such as the installation of a pipe organ and a massive Rose Window. Although that organ has been replaced, the Rose Window was moved in 1960 and still is situated at the center of our sanctuary front wall. Growth in the Boston suburbs and new transportation access to Wellesley created rapid growth in church membership and Sunday School enrollment.

Additional space for children's school and social activity for youth and adults became a priority. Several proposals were studied, including the purchase of neighboring residences on either side of the property. Although forty years later both properties would be purchased, at the time the decision was made to squeeze an addition behind an older building. Construction on new “parish house,” as it was known at the time,

began in 1928. It cost \$81,000 and was funded through donations and several mortgages. Religious services continued to be held in the original church.

The building of the new "Parish House," or "Parish Hall" as we now call it, was a major undertaking, but it came at an unfortunate time - 1929. Projections that the membership of the Society would continue to grow at a staggering pace (it had nearly doubled in the previous ten years) would be dashed by the Great Depression. In addition, optimistic financial goals proved impossible to achieve.

A 1937 report indicates that the church was in a difficult financial situation with outstanding debts of \$37,000. "How did we acquire this debt?" the report asks, then answers: "In the building of Parish House." It adds, "Remember it was planned and started in that gay and giddy year of 1929, when even the judgment of the wise men of this parish was over-optimistic." Most of the money was owed to the Wellesley Trust Company, and the account, which was charging 6%, was current. However, almost a third was borrowed from the AUA and that loan was in arrears.

The 1929 Parish House was squeezed behind a residential house, visible here at the left. This house was moved in 1960 for the new sanctuary. Notice the neighboring house on the far left of the picture below.





The church soon became the center of the social lives of the members. Many clubs and activities, most now forgotten, were instituted. A booklet from the 1930's lists several other organizations within the church at that time: the Laymen's League for men, the Cheerful Letter Committee, the Scissors and Paste Society, the Jefferson Fellowship, the Junior AUJ, the Parish Players, the Fireside Club, and the Children's Church. One of the largest organizations was the Women's Alliance, which was originally called the Ladies Sewing Circle; it dated back to the earliest years of the Society.

Rev. Swisher was succeeded in 1934 by Rev. James Luther Adams, who would leave a lasting impression on the Society even though his tenure was remarkably short. Rev. Adams was well known as a liberal theologian and social ethicist when he accepted the ministerial call to Wellesley. He would leave the church after just one year to accept a professorship at Meadville Theology School in Chicago. Later, he would join the faculty of Harvard Divinity School, where he would teach until his retirement in 1968. He was remembered thirty-five years later by church member Marion Niles in a reminiscence contained in the 1971 book *In Our Voices* as "the one who would open up the cloistered walls of the church to the problems of social concern."

These "problems of social concern" would matter a great deal to future leadership of the Society. In a 1941 letter to his successor in Wellesley, Rev. Adams warned of a "terrible holocaust" and concluded that "the church of the next decade will have hard work to

do...it will have to teach us the meaning of the words justice and mercy and thus kill the seeds of Fascism that are in us.”

Speaking to the sorry state of the historical records of the Society, Mr. Adams lamented the loss of his papers and those of other ministers as well. When his successor, Rev. Waitstill Sharp, inquired of Rev. Adams if he knew where some important historical documents were located, he replied:

“[Mrs. Adams] tells me that we heard long ago of the disappearance of the records. I must confess that I don't remember hearing of this before. Certainly, it would be erroneous to suppose that these records were left in the parsonage. They were left in the desk of the minister's study in the church, where the parish assistant took over when I left. Whoever was to blame for this loss, it is a great pity; and I imagine what a terribly difficult situation the loss has made for you.”

Shortly after her arrival at UUSWH in 2018, Rev. Kelly Murphy Mason urged the Society to transfer its historic archives to Harvard Divinity School. The Standing Committee voted unanimously to do so and Chair Elaine Mittell oversaw the details of transfer in 2019. The common hope is that important pieces of UUSWH history not get lost again.

When the Sharps Went To War

Rev. Waitstill Hastings Sharp began his ministry in Wellesley in April 1936, but it was clear from the outset that his wife Martha was an equal partner in the endeavor. Wellesley was slowly recovering from the Great Depression, but like many progressive thinkers at the time, the Sharps were greatly concerned with the spread of Fascism in Spain, Italy, and Germany. The Sharps attended meetings and discussion groups about the growing problems for Jews and liberal thinkers in Europe.

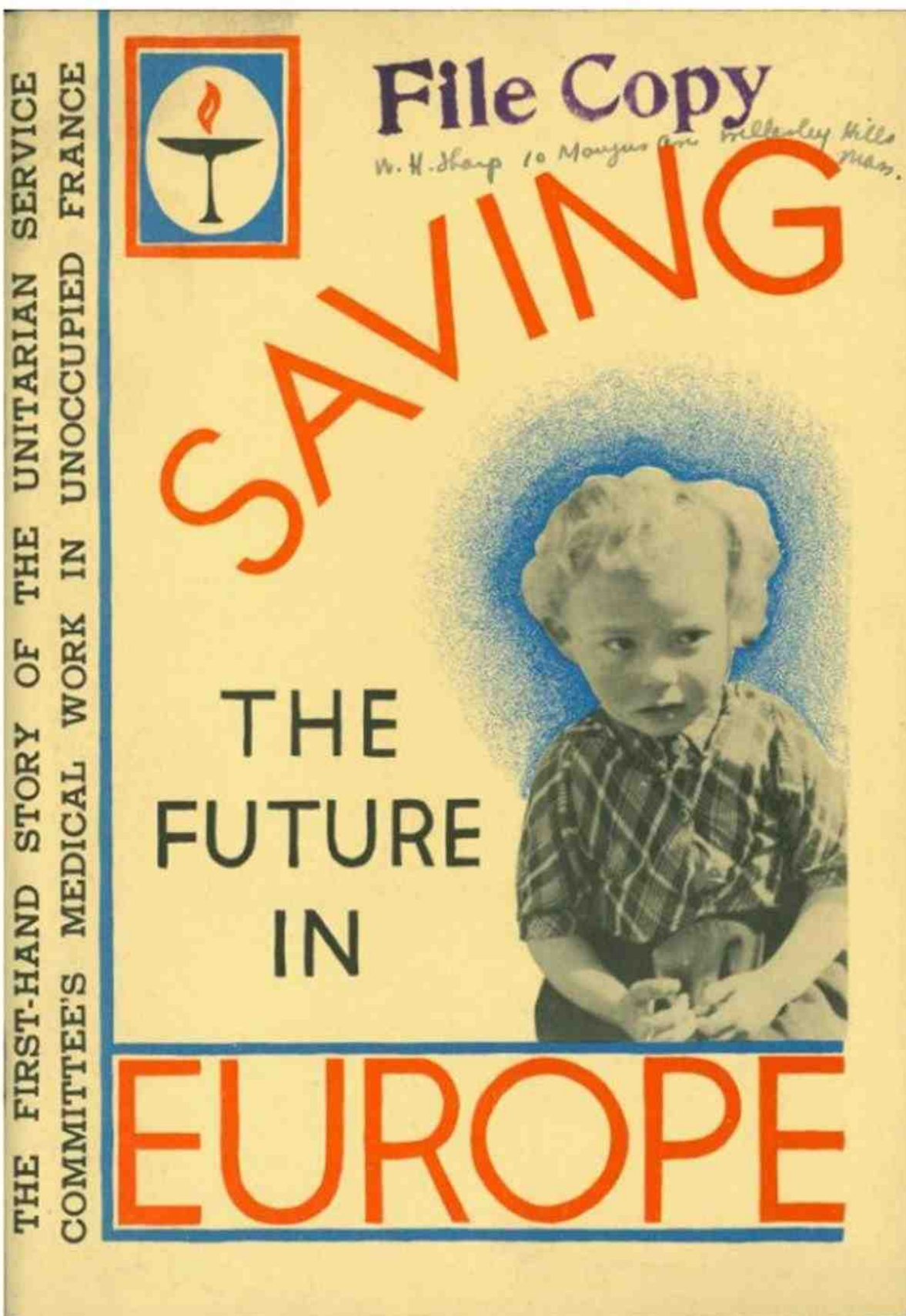
At one of these meetings, a member of our Society who was also vice-president of the AUA proposed the idea that the Unitarians establish a service committee to assist refugees who were fleeing Germany and pouring into the Unitarian churches in Czechoslovakia.

In February 1939, the Sharps, compelled by their faith and moral outrage, accepted an overseas mission from the AUA, placed their children in the hands of members and friends of UUSWH, and left for Prague. In a 1971 volume titled *In Our Voices*, Vahe Boyajian recalled that “When Waitstill Sharp took a year off to go to Europe and help the war effort – that was a real challenge left for the congregation. And we did alright. We had no minister, but people ...kept the wheels rolling and the spirit alive.” Over the next six years the Sharps would devote their energies to the fledgling Unitarian Service

Committee. They made two extended trips to Europe, spending months establishing immigration centers in Czechoslovakia, Spain, Portugal, and France,

The Sharps are credited with saving hundreds of lives through the Unitarian Service Committee. Their combined efforts were recognized by the Israeli government in 2005, when they became only the second and third Americans to be named "Righteous Among Nations" at the Martyrs and Heroes memorial, Yad Vashem, in Jerusalem. Some of their papers are now housed in the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

Rev. Sharp's personal copy of the history of the Unitarian Service Committee is in the archives of the United States Holocaust Museum.



After nearly six years of juggling his Wellesley ministry with work for the Service Committee, in May 1944 Rev. Sharp resigned from UUSWH and began working full-time in Cairo with the United Nations Displaced Persons Relief Agency. Although biographer Ghanda Di Figlia could find “*no evidence to suggest that [Waitstill and Martha] had become dissatisfied with his ministry in Wellesley,*” she speculates that he may have found it difficult “*to serve both the socially conscious among his parishioners and those extreme conservatives who thought the New Deal a Constitutional travesty.*” Di Figlia also ventures, “*Parish work at that particular period in his own and the world's history might have seemed almost beside the point.*”

Rev. Sharp would spend the next five years working in Europe and the Middle East with the UN, the Unitarian Service Committee, and Hadassah, a Jewish relief organization. He returned to the United States in 1950 where he became a civil rights and community organizer in the Chicago area. In 1954, he returned to the Unitarian ministry, serving in Iowa, Michigan, and again in Massachusetts. He and Martha, along with former minister Rev. Adams, returned to UUSWH to attend the 1971 Centennial Celebration of the congregation.

Martha became a political activist and remained in Wellesley. In 1946, she won the Democratic nomination to run against incumbent Republican Joseph Martin for the U.S. House. In an early case of red-baiting, Martin, who had represented the district since 1925, accused Martha of being a Communist sympathizer. Although there was already a woman congressman from Massachusetts, Martha would have been the first woman from the state who did not fill her husband's unexpired term. Martha did not prevail and the following year Joseph Martin would become Speaker of the House of Representatives.

In 1945, the Finance Committee proposed a large celebration, a Diamond Jubilee, celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Society. The Finance Committee began its annual campaign with this statement: “*The Unitarian tradition of liberalism makes us realize our responsibility in helping find the way of a permanent peace...we have an important job to do.*” Although war was never far from their minds, they declared “*our church, (is) an association of over 300 Wellesley families who are enriched by the strength and beauty that comes to us through religion.*” It was probably not a coincidence that the large celebratory event was held at the church on December 8th, 1946, exactly five years after the declaration of war.

In 1998 the church dedicated a meeting room in Parish Hall to honor the legacy of Waitstill and Martha Sharp.

Long-Term Ministry Resumes

The era following World War II saw another big influx of residents to Wellesley and growth of the Unitarian Society followed. This period of expansion was overseen by Rev. William Brooks Rice, who was called by our congregation in 1945 and served until his death in 1970. Rev. Rice would lead us through the unprecedented growth of the Society following the Second World War, the expansion of our facilities through the purchase of an auxiliary building and the construction of a new large sanctuary. We honor him today by calling the auxiliary building "Rice House."

Membership peaked in 1963 with 395 active members

25 Beacon Street, Boston 8, Mass.

UNIFIED ANNUAL QUESTIONNAIRE for 1962-1963

ORGANIZATION IDENTIFICATION: State or Province Mass City or Town Wellesley 81
 Name of Church, Society or Fellowship (as it appears in your bylaws) Unitarian Society of Wellesley Hills

Directory Information: Date of Church Organization or Fellowship Affiliation 1871
 Street Address 309 Washington St Mail Address (if different) Wellesley Hills 81
 Voting Membership 395 Building Fund Expense 8000 Church School Pupils 371
 Current Operating Expense \$ 52800 Time Meeting April 1962

Major Offices: Please list and give Name and Address
 Minister ☒ President ☐ or Chairman ☐ William B Rice
 (check which applies) Date of Settlement 1945 (Full) (Part) Time Full

Is the society incorporated? yes Date? 1877 Is there a workable constitution and bylaws? yes How recently have the bylaws been revised? (year) 1953 Is there a dual organization of the church and parish? No Is the church organization departmentalized? yes Is there provision for rotation of Trustees, Deacon and other administrative officers? yes Is the minister a member ex-officio of all major boards, committees of the church? yes

Total Membership as of 5/1/61 385 No. added 18 No. lost 8 between 5/1/61 through 5/1/62. TOTAL ACTIVE MEMBERSHIP AS OF MAY 1, 1962 395 Total Membership (5/1/62) ? Constituency (5/1/62) 900 ±
 Number of Adults on your mailing list (Members and non-members) 900 ± Number of families, not exclusively members, to whom the church ministers? 450 Number of Children? 371 What is the average Sunday morning congregation? 200
 What is the hour of the Sunday service? 11 Is the service of worship liturgical or non-liturgical? Non-lit What is the hymn book used? H.S. Is there a regular organist? yes Paid? yes A Soloist? 3
 Quartet? Senior Choir? yes Are the singers paid? No What departments or communities are functioning:

HOSPITALITY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS EDUCATION	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> WORLD SERVICE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PROPERTY
MEMBERSHIP	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS SERVICE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COLLEGE CENTERS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FINANCE
PUBLICITY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DENOMINATIONAL AFFAIRS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> (OTHERS)



The Boston papers and the New York Times covered Rev. Rice's campaign against his right-wing parishoner

Rev. Rice strove to combine local ministry with public service, both in the context of denominational affairs and in the pressing social issues of his time. He brought a progressive and controversial perspective to questions such as civil rights and nuclear disarmament, and addressed these topics in his sermons. He often found himself in conflict with some conservative townspeople, even those within his own congregation. He published a petition in *The Wellesley Townsman* supporting the local chapter of a ban-the-bomb organization, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which had run a controversial ad in *The New York Times*.

During the height of the McCarthy witch hunting era, Rev. Rice was faced with an ethical dilemma that split the congregation. He ran for the position of library trustee because he was worried by positions taken by one of the trustees in Wellesley. That trustee was a founding member of the John Birch Society, and also a congregant at UUSWH; he was a scion from one of the original Wellesley Unitarian families. The controversy split the congregation and was reported in Boston newspapers. Even The New York Times sent a reporter who reported the story, "Birch Unit Aide Pitted Against Cleric in Vote." Rev. Rice won that election in 1962.



This proposal by the architect eliminated the gothic bell tower and eyebrow window. Luckily it was rejected.

Around this time and shortly after the death of her husband, Aurelia Plath and her daughter Sylvia joined UUSWH. Sylvia attended Sunday School and participated in other activities. Her mother became very active in the late 1940s serving on the Religious Education committee. The future poet exhibited a complicated relationship with both the Society and the faith throughout her life.

Rev. Rice took an active part in counseling young Sylvia following an early suicide attempt. However, a fictionalized version of him is presented in a somewhat negative manner in her autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*. Sylvia did not attend church regularly, but it seems the Unitarian influence remained strong. After reading about an American Unitarian minister's sermon on bomb shelters in 1961, she wrote to her mother from England, *"I'd really be a church-goer if I was back in Wellesley or America --- the Unitarian Church is my church. How I miss it! There is just no choice here."*

Tragically, Sylvia Plath committed suicide in 1963; she was awarded a Pulitzer Prize posthumously in 1983.

As Rev. Rice led our congregation through unprecedented growth, he also continued to provide key leadership in denominational affairs. He had been a member of the AUA Board since 1941, but Rev. Rice had been raised and ordained in the Universalist Church before starting to serve Unitarian Congregations. In 1956 he was chosen to lead the Joint Merger Commission, which sought to consolidate the Universalist Church of America (UCA) and the American Universalist Association (AUA).

The merger was controversial at the time because the Universalists feared that they would be subsumed by the larger Unitarian denomination. It was said that they feared they would be "submerged rather than merged." While originally skeptical of the merger, Rice himself had come to advocate the consolidation stating he felt that one "would be hard put to spell out any clear difference between Unitarians as a whole and Universalists as a whole." For years, he devoted much time and thought to the matter, hammering out important details such as asset distributions, locations of offices, leadership and organizational structures, and even the name of the new Unitarian Universalist denomination. When the AUA and the UCA finally merged on May 12, 1961, a new religion of 895 congregations was formed.

Raymond Hopkins, who served as secretary of the Joint Merger Commission of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), observed that "without Bill's reputation, leadership, commitment, and determination, consolidation never would have happened". Ironically though, UUSWH did not fully adopt the Universalist nomenclature until 1990.

After the merger, in 1961, Rev. Rice ran for election as the first president of the newly consolidated UUA against his friend, Rev. Dana McLean Greeley, who had previously been president of the AUA. The two candidates had differing visions of the kind of leadership needed at the UUA, but in a close election Greeley prevailed. Rev. Rice continued to serve the UUA in various positions, including chairing the UUA Commission on Religion and Race. Rice served UUSWH until his death in 1970, but ironically, two separate Unitarian and Universalist congregations remained in Wellesley for a decade after merger.

Rev. Rice died unexpectedly in 1970 at age 64, several months short of his planned retirement. A veteran of World War II, he helped lead this congregation through the dark years of segregation, McCarthyism, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War, maintaining throughout that "the liberal church is the only church which can speak to our troubled age with courage and effectiveness."



Children's Fair sometime in 1950s, on the front lawn
before the new sanctuary was built

UNIVERSALIST CHURCH IN WELLESLEY

The Community Universalist Church of Wellesley had been established in 1945. When its new sanctuary was dedicated on Weston Road, the national Superintendent of the Universalist Church of America gave his charge to the congregation in 1950. Some UUs today might find it offensive. In an article dated November 1950, The Wellesley Townsman quoted his charge:

"It is high time that the laymen and lay-women of America initiate within their churches and among their clergy a forthright campaign of rebellion and reform.... Christian theology is utterly archaic.... Mysticism violates the law of cause and effect, ritual and ceremony can be enemies of rational and ethical religion. There is dictatorship in religion as surely as there is dictatorship in government. Let intelligent Americans beware."

For a while in the 1960s the only church that was identified as UU in The Wellesley Townsman weekly calendar was the Natick-Wellesley Community Church (Unitarian / Universalist). Our Society was listed simply as "Unitarian." The Universalist church provided a much more progressive alternative to UUSWH, perhaps too progressive for its place and time, since it dwindled and ceased operations in 1970. During the Vietnam War, the Church took a radical stand and offered "religious sanctuary" to a draft resister. In a 2001 interview, Rev. John Nichols indicated that UUSWH in the 1970s could never have agreed to such an action. It is little wonder that when the Universalist church disbanded, only a few members chose to affiliate with our Society.



Times of Transition

In December 1971, UUSWH called a minister who, like his predecessors, was soon asked to dedicate himself to dual causes: the local congregation, and the wider UU movement. Like Rev. Sharp, Rev. Robert E. Senghas had graduated from Harvard Law School.

Senghas, who had been a Marine during the Korean War, practiced law in San Francisco for five years before he found a new calling in ministry. He attended Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley and for seven years he served the Unitarian church in Davis, California. Rev. Senghas was an activist minister who participated in civil rights marches in Selma, Alabama, and draft resistance activities in the 1960's. Unfortunately for UUSWH, Rev. Senghas' valuable organizational and legal skills were

requested at the UUA, and after only three years he left our Society to become Executive Director of the UUA.

Two interim ministers followed Rev. Senghas' abbreviated ministry, and it became clear the congregation was again in dire need of stable long-term leadership. Three ministers over six years had left the congregation in disarray and facing a leadership crisis. It needed someone who could concentrate on congregational affairs, rebuild the Society, and not be preoccupied with denominational affairs.

Although the general population of Wellesley had stabilized, the lack of consistent leadership was affecting the Society and we were experiencing a significant decline. Attendance at Sunday services had steadily decreased from an average of 176 ten years earlier to just over a hundred in 1976. Sunday school registration, which had peaked at 425 in the 1960s, was down to about 120, with actual attendance about half of that.

Long Term Leadership and Growth

UUSWH called Rev. John H. Nichols to minister to this congregation in 1977. He would revitalize congregational life over the next twenty-five years. Under his leadership, membership and attendance increased steadily. Within ten years, membership would climb to 319 and attendance at Sunday services would average 144. In 1986, the church school could boast that it was one of the 15 largest UU schools in the country. By 1995 membership in UUSWH had grown to 335, registration at the church school was 166, and average attendance at Sunday services was 157. The Society was in need of larger Sunday school facilities and an updated physical plant.

A major capital campaign was initiated in 1997 and \$1.5 million was raised from 234 pledges. Known as "Legacy", the project completed many aspects of the 1960 addition that had been postponed and many systems were modernized. Land was purchased for an expanded parking area and the main entrance to the sanctuary was moved. The foyer between church buildings was upgraded and an elevator was installed to comply with Americans with Disabilities Act.

The 1997 renovation added the parking lot entrance and subdued the bright 1960 color scheme to match the older buildings



In his 2016 book, *Lives that Speak and Deeds that Beckon: A History of the Unitarian Society of Wellesley Hills*, Rev. Nichols noted that the millennium began on a high note – attendance and participation was strong, and the annual budget was \$358,000. A \$400,000 general endowment had been created by the congregation, which established an additional fund of \$100,000 for intern stipends that was named in his honor.

Entering the Twenty-First Century

The new millennium brought significant changes to our congregation. After 130 years of male ministers, the next three ministers called into settlement at UUSWH will be women. This coincided with broader trends in UU ministry, which in recent years has become female dominated. Simultaneously, a more cooperative model of “shared ministry” was becoming the norm in our congregations. While UUSWH had always had progressive elements, there would be increased overall awareness of social justice and environmental concerns. Our congregation would offer public witness and vocal advocacy around important causes.

In 2001, Rev. Phyllis B. O’Connell was called as the first woman to serve as Senior Minister. O’Connell entered the ministry after raising her family and after she completed her intern ministry at UUSWH with Rev. Nichols. Eight years later, she started her settlement here.

O'Connell had a warm way with UUSWH congregants. She made it clear that she relished the interpersonal parts of her job more than the institutional duties. Summing up her 9-year tenure here, she wrote in her Annual Report dated 2009 that what meant the most to her were *"the programs near and dear to my heart – Small Group Ministry, Soup With Friends, Worship at North Hill, and Interfaith Hospitality Network."* A long-time UUSWH member observed that Rev. O'Connell increased connections with outside UU organizations and initiatives as well. In addition, she involved the congregation in the homeless hospitality network organized by Family Promise MetroWest.

Rev. O'Connell greatly expanded the work that UUSWH did as a "Welcoming Congregation," increasing our visibility as local leader on LGBTQ issues. At its 2000 Annual Meeting, the congregation overwhelmingly affirmed its readiness *"to be recognized as a Welcoming Congregation—inclusive and expressive of the concerns of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgender at every level of church life—and prepared to work to promote justice, freedom and equality for this population in the larger society."*

In 2011, the Society called Rev. Sara Ascher as its Senior Minister. A native of Chelmsford, Massachusetts, she had been raised a UU. She studied at Andover-Newton Theological Seminary and also completed an internship supervised by Rev. Nichols before serving as the minister at the UU congregation in Brookfield, Massachusetts. During her tenure here, she involved congregants more intensively with international outreach to UUs in Europe and Africa, leading congregants on trips abroad to Burundi and Romania. In 2016, she left the congregation to accept a position as Executive Director of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU), a position she still holds today.

The Unitarian Universalist Society of Wellesley Hills was the launching pad for the creation of West Suburban Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Youth (WAGLY), a local not-for-profit organization serving LGBTQ+ youth. In 2010, Rev. Jack Lewis, although a recent graduate from a Congregational seminary, was hired as the Director of Religious Education. Jack brought energetic and passionate liberal agenda to the congregation and led youth service-learning trips to New York City, West Virginia, Nicaragua and Guatemala.

As a gay man, he wanted to increase understanding around the needs of LGBTQ youth. The Society became the launching pad for WAGLY, a thriving organization offering youth programs, which later became OUT Metrowest. Rev. Lewis tendered his resignation to the church and became its first Executive Director. The first chair of its Board of Directors was long-time UUSWH member Kathy Kaufmann. And while OUT MetroWest is no longer affiliated with our church, WAGLY continues to meet weekly in Parish Hall.

In 2020 the organization has three full time employees, two part-time employees, and runs more than a dozen youth meetings per month out of locations in Framingham, Newton, and Wellesley. It counts over 300 active participants. In 2018, Jack Lewis was elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives from Framingham and took only an advisory role with the group. Kathy Kaufmann remained active in the organization, and along with UUSWH member Cara Fearing serves on the Board of Directors.



As it grew more environmentally conscious, the congregation also completed a process of study and reform to create more sustainable ways of operating its facilities. In 2012, UUSWH was accredited as a “Green Sanctuary” by the UUA, in recognition of its “efforts in working together to restore Earth and renew Spirit.”

TROUBLED WATERS LEADS TO RENEWAL

In September 2013, Mother Nature dealt the church a severe blow. A quick but powerful rainfall began the disastrous situation. The storm drain system on Washington Street could not handle the torrent and water collected in the area in front of the parking entrance to a depth of eight inches. Our parking lot funneled the surging water down toward the rear of the property where it flooded into an open basement window. The

entire basement flooded. Damage was extensive as the lower level rooms accumulated 26.5 inches of standing water and the mechanical room in the sub-basement was flooded to the ceiling. The cost of repairs amounted to hundreds of thousands of dollars and the finances of the Society were in jeopardy. Chair of the UUSWH Standing Committee John Pattillo hoped that the town would assume responsibility for the role its negligence may have played in the flood, but Wellesley never did.



The flood then served as a catalyst for a Capital Campaign. Pattillo wrote, "Although the flood was a financial setback, it has in many ways turned out to be an energizing event for the congregation." It provided a visioning opportunity as UUSWH conducted a thorough property assessment and analyzed the programming needs on campus. A Capital Campaign Committee, co-chaired by David Barnard and Lynn Larsen, developed a \$1,350,000 long range plan. Although this goal was not achieved, the pledges of \$1,162,000 ensured that all vital projects were completed, and a surplus was even returned to the standard operating budget in 2017. Extensive renovations were completed in the following three years. The theme of this Capital Campaign was "ReNEWal."



Before and After pictures of the Activity Room where the flooding began.

The donated funds made possible the remodeling and the restoring of the interior and basement level of Parish Hall. Old inaccessible plumbing for water, heat, and waste was replaced. The plan called for a thorough renovation of Rice House. Mechanical systems were replaced, two new bathrooms were created, offices for church staff were reconfigured, and the meeting area was updated. Air conditioning systems were installed in Rice House and in the chapel for summer services.

KEN BURNS' DOCUMENTARY ABOUT REV. SHARP

One of the largest and most successful events at UUSWH in recent memory was the gathering in 2016 to present the PBS documentary "Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War." The film, produced by noted filmmaker Ken Burns and the Sharps' grandson Artemis Joukowsky. "The story of Waitstill and Martha Sharp is one of the most incredible tales of compassion, sacrifice and heroism that I have ever heard," Burns said, "and I was completely unaware of it until five years ago when Artemis Joukowsky first shared it with me." (In 2016, Joukowsky also released his book Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War through the UU publishing house, Beacon Press.)

Three hundred friends of the Society attended this screening and a panel discussion that followed. Special guests included the UU Service Committee (UUSC) President, Tom Andrews, and Catherine Chvany, one of the 27 Jewish children rescued by the Sharps. Catherine and her sister lived with the Niles family from our congregation until she was reunited with her parents two years later. In the film she declares, "What I owe

Martha is my life in America. Perhaps my life itself." She thanked UUSWH and the family she stayed with in Wellesley when she first arrived in this country.



Tom Andrews reminded the large audience that we must not only recognize the Sharps' courage, but we must emulate it today. He pointed out that the Service Committee continues projects for humanitarian relief in Latin America, Syria, and other places suffering under oppressive regimes.

Reverend Kelly Murphy Mason

The Rev. Kelly Murphy Mason is the 13th called minister for our congregation in its 150-year history and the 3rd woman. She had a number of successful community ministries in New York City for a dozen years before coming to UUSWH. Before she accepted the call of this congregation in 2018, she was serving as Community Minister at the First Unitarian Congregational Society in Brooklyn. She was also teaching UU students at Union Theological Seminary, her alma mater, where she had previously worked as the Pastoral Counselor on campus. She was also Managing Director of the Psychotherapy & Spirituality Institute in Manhattan. She brought a great appreciation for practical theology along with a keen interest in the social sciences; she has a deep commitment to adapting religious life to contemporary realities and cultivating meaningful connections in faith communities.



Due to the pandemic of 2020, Rev. Kelly Murphy Mason led services via Zoom from a pulpit in her home.

Rev. Mason expanded the online presence of UU Wellesley Hills on social media to include a Twitter feed, a YouTube channel, and a Spotify podcast, in addition to a Facebook page and Instagram account. She also relaunched the UU Wellesley Hills website so that worship services could be viewed each Sunday service online with ease. This made the transition to virtual churchgoing almost immediately possible after the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic in March 2020.

In a March 12th dispatch co-signed with Standing Committee Chair Kathy Coolidge, Rev. Mason announced “a decision to close our church campus to the public for two (2) weeks starting this Sun. Mar. 15th at 5:30 p.m. Our 10:30 a.m. service in the Sanctuary this Sunday will be the last in-person worship for a couple of weeks, at least.” This meant halting Sunday services, but there were implications for the day-care facility and other renters, as well as the cancellation of the annual rummage-sale fundraiser. Their announcement concluded: “Through March and possibly into April, we may have to envision newer ways of being in community and doing church.” Three days later the governor of Massachusetts would prohibit gatherings of 25 or more; a week later the restriction was lowered to gatherings of 10.

Remarkably, approximately 100 years earlier, the church faced a similar situation with the 1918 Spanish Influenza pandemic. Before the widespread use of computers, televisions, and even telephones, questions about how to respond to this disaster were debated. Our minister at the time, Rev. Potter, wrote in the local paper:

“If you could hear what the overworked nurses and doctors in various hospitals are saying about clergymen who persist in herding their followers together in defiance of the laws of health during this epidemic, you would realize the truth of the sentence on our church bulletin....CHURCH CLOSED – Ignoring disease never was and never will be good religion.”

As we celebrate the 150th anniversary of this congregation in February 2021, we are also rapidly approaching the first anniversary of the closure of our church campus to the public and the shift to virtual operations. The original 3-week closure announced in early March was repeatedly extended throughout 2020 and is now in place through June 2021, per the recommendation of the Phased Reopening Advisory Group convened by the Board.

The elimination of revenue-producing activities at the start of the pandemic was an immediate concern. Luckily, the 2020 Stewardship Committee headed by Peter Stoner succeeded in raising \$320,514 from 83 pledge units, 48 of whom increased their pledge in response to the pandemic. In April 2020, at a Special Congregational Meeting held via Zoom the congregation authorized UUSWH Treasurer Betsy Taylor to take advantage of an emergency federal program allowing small businesses to borrow money, and our congregation accepted a Paycheck Protection Program loan for \$44,100, which in 2021 was entirely forgiven.

This past year at UUSWH has been historic in its own right; it has been a year full of firsts. We held our first-ever online annual meeting in June 2020, and the congregation voted to ratify a new set of Bylaws, which replaced the earlier ones from 1963. These new Bylaws presented a more streamlined system of congregational governance; governing was no longer done by the Standing Committee, but by a smaller Board of Trustees. These Trustees elected Coolidge to her second term as Chair.

The congregation also voted to pass a resolution affirming that Black Lives Matter. Since November 2017, the Advocacy & Witness Task Force on our Social Action Council had been organizing silent monthly vigils along Washington St. After the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020, co-chairs Elaine Mittell and Therese Kelly drafted this statement along with Rev. Mason:

At this pivotal moment in American history, the Unitarian Universalist Society of Wellesley Hills publicly declares its collective commitment to promoting greater racial justice. Our congregation resoundingly affirms that Black Lives Matter. We recognize the urgent need for anti-racist education and action and will work toward strategies, policies, and reforms that challenge racial inequality and systemic oppression. Witnessing to our belief in human worth and dignity, we proclaim our intention to enlist our energies and resources in creating a more just and equitable society for all.

Following that unanimous vote, the congregation hung a banner declaring its belief on the outside of the Sanctuary, just below the 1929 Rose Window. After a brief hiatus, the monthly vigils resumed outdoors, with people wearing masks and distancing themselves

six feet apart on the sidewalk as they witnessed for racial justice. Because our congregation is not as old as some other UU parishes in the area and was founded in post-bellum America, we do not have as troubled a history as those congregations with long-standing connections to the trans-Atlantic African slave trade.



One of the few activities that continued during the pandemic

History is continually unfolding before us. During this pandemic, we do things our Society founders could never have imagined. We hold virtual worship, our Board meets remotely in a Zoom room, our weekly plate collection is taken up electronically through our website, the choir records anthems on their cell phones, and the church directory gets updated on the Breeze database.

While the hope at UUSWH is to return to in-person programming as soon as it is safe for everyone to do so, in all likelihood, this congregation will rely on a hybrid model in the future, one that makes good use of newer technology. We do not know all the innovations that we may yet see happen.



The choir sang on a Zoom online service during the 2021 pandemic

What has remained constant throughout our 150 years of history is the dedication of members and friends of our Society to building a community of faith that enriches our communal life and improves the state of our world overall. We have always had thoughtful and generous people in our Wellesley Hills congregation. While we have an impressive history, we also have the future that still lies ahead of us, and together our friends and members are writing new chapters, all the time.