



First Unitarian Church of Baltimore

(Universalist & Unitarian)

Corner of Charles & Franklin Streets

A MYSTIC LINK

Rev. Robert L. Zoerheide, D. D.

Minister Emeritus

December, 1993

If there is a mystic link between the words of a church and its edifice – “a sense of sublime of something far more deeply interfused” – there could not have been a more significant mating for the founding of the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore) than the word artistry of Dr. William Ellery Channing of New England and the architectural church concept of Maximilian Godefroy of France.

The 27 founders who in 1817 pledged the money needed to building the First Independent Church of Baltimore, as it was originally named, wanted the best architect available. They engaged Maximilian Godefroy. Because of his political troubles and imprisonment in France during the French Revolution, Godefroy had fled to America a few years earlier. He was teaching architecture at St. Mary’s College in Baltimore and may have been the first professional teacher of architecture in this country.

Godefroy was well acquainted with the Pantheon in Rome and the Pantheon in Paris of classical style and dedicated to Sainte Genevieve. He deplored the red brick construction in Baltimore and the Middle Atlantic States. Using stone masonry, he exercised his freedom and intellectual understanding in a design of Romantic Classicism – a sphere on a cube. The cube gave a base denoting solidity; the sphere, an encompassing roundness with elevating grandeur. Architectural writer Henry Hitchcock cites the church as “one of the best examples of Romantic Classicism.” For many years, college classes in architecture have visited the church to view and study its design. Designated a National Historic Landmark in 1972, the First Unitarian Church is the oldest church in the country built by and for Unitarians and in continuous use since its dedication.

After the church was dedicated on October 19, 1818, Jared Sparks, who was later to become President of Harvard College, was called as minister. His mentor, William Ellery Channing, was the logical choice to preach the ordination sermon. On his way to Baltimore, Channing stopped in New York City to meet with and inspire those who would found All Souls.

In Baltimore, the unifying words of Channing setting forth the basic principles of Unitarianism brought a challenging prophetic focus into mainstream Christianity and religious orthodoxy. Because of a sweeping freshness, the sermon known around the world

as “The Baltimore Sermon,” became the most widely distributed of any to that date. Soon after delivery on May 5, 1819, it was translated into seven languages and circulated in as many countries. At the time, it influenced three presidents: Jefferson and both John and John Quincy Adams. It would reach into the future to impress Mohandas Gandhi and other world leaders.

There is indeed a mystic link between the landmark achievement of Godefoy’s architectural concept of the church, which gave French Romantic Classicism its fulfillment in Baltimore rather than in war-torn Paris, and the prophetic Baltimore sermon of Channing setting forth the principles of Unitarianism

In 1919, the American Unitarian Association placed a plaque on the east wall of the church commemorating the 100th anniversary of Dr. Channing’s sermon. On Sunday, May 15, 1994, a Union service was held to commemorate the 175th Anniversary of the “Baltimore Sermon” with UUA President John Buehrens as guest minister. The tradition of commemorating the Baltimore Sermon on the first Sunday of May has continued since that time. This year, our guest minister will be Rev. Peter Morales of Golden, Colorado. Rev. Morales and Rev. Laurel Hallman, our guest minister last year, are the two candidates to succeed Rev. William Sinkford as UUA President. The election will take place at this year’s General Assembly in June.

Updated 2/09 CAEvans