

GREENFELD GROUP
A Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Study Group
Paper: Phebe Ann Coffin Hanaford: an Independent Woman from Nantucket
Written and Read by: Rosemarie C. Smurzynski on November 27, 2006

The politics of memory has shaped whom history remembers and whom it doesn't.

Reading from Historic Nantucket. 2002.

A Paper Trail: Piecing Together the Life of Phebe Hanford by Lisa Tetrault

...for complicated reasons, this extraordinary woman (Phebe Ann Coffin Hanaford) is almost forgotten today.... To write a fully rendered and usable past, then, requires including those important but now forgotten women (men) in our stories.

*Phebe Hanaford was born a Quaker on Nantucket Mass on May 6,1829. She was the only child of George Coffin and Phebe Ann Barnard Coffin.

* At age 20 she married Joseph Hanaford, a homeopathic physician and teacher ten years her senior. She took up her husband's faith and became a Baptist.

* In her thirties Phebe discovered Universalism, and at age 39 in 1868 was ordained to its ministry.

* She separated from her husband in 1870 and lived 42 years with children's writer, Ellen Miles.

* In her life she served six Universalist Churches, wrote 14 books, including a best seller on the life of Abraham Lincoln released shortly after his death, numerous sermons, political articles and speeches, and edited several journals.

* Phebe died June 2, 1921. She was 92 years of age.

I want this evening to bring to you this remarkable women of the 19th century, our religious forebear, whose life and work lay before us issues of the heart, constructs for the mind, matters for the soul and actions for the hands.

The Nantucket Years

On her paternal side Phebe descended from Tristram Coffin; on her maternal side Peter Folger. Both were among the first white settlers on Nantucket Island. She grew up surrounded by an extended family of Coffins and Folgers. Her schooling was local and rigorous. The Island flourished with a whaling industry second to none. Because of that few men lived on Island. This set up a dynamic that raised independent minded women of which Phebe was but one. Maria Mitchell, the great 19th century woman astronomer a contemporary of Phebe's on the Island, was another and Phebe's cousin as well. Phebe's birth religion, Quaker, trained her to trust her inner voice; Island living instilled in her an independence few women of the era enjoyed.

Marriage

The Hanafords lived after their marriage in Nantucket where their two children, Howard 1851 and Florence 1854 were born. In 1857 the household moved to Beverly MA. To supplement the Hanaford income Phebe turned to her writing as a source of income. She was clear though that writing was an economic and not a vocational choice. Vocation would come later.

It was in Beverly that Phebe became a Universalist. The conversion came after the deaths of her younger brother, Rowland, and sister, Jane, and while she was reading the Bible where she found scriptural support for the religion. Phebe embraced Universalism's belief in one loving God and universal salvation, and was moved by its social action agenda. In Beverley Phebe became involved in the Abolition, Woman's Rights and Temperance movements. I like to think Phebe

met the ancestors of the church I currently serve, Northshore UU, for NSUU had predecessor Universalist churches in Danvers and Peabody near Beverly, Mass and its 19th century history is filled with social activism in those three movements.

Involved in the Woman's Right to Vote movement Phebe met Miss Ellen Miles. Phebe would soon spend the rest of her life with Miss Miles until Ellen died in 1914. The Nantucket Historical Society has a fair number of Phebe and Ellen's loving and passionate letters to each other. They also have letters from others to Phebe, which often end with "Please give my love to your friend, Miss Miles."

What happened to Phebe's husband parishioner's asked me when I preached on Phebe in early November. What I know is that they separated but never divorced, that she raised the children, and that he spent the rest of his days in Reading, MA, and died in 1907.

During this time Phebe also became friends with Olympia Brown the first Universalist woman to be ordained (1863) to that ministry.

Ministry

Reading from UUA's *Shouting Singing Celebrating 200 years of Universalism* 1990.

Universalists early on opened up the ministry to women. By the time the 19th amendment to the US Constitution had been passed on August 6, 1920 giving women the right to vote in the US, a total of 88 women had been ordained to the

ministry by the Universalists, less than half of that number 42 by the Unitarians.

Olympia Brown opened the door for herself to be ordained and then mentored Phebe through, too. Olympia was so taken with Phebe's passion, perception and intellect, of her embrace of Universalism's theology of love and social action agenda, and of her understanding of God as Love that she urged Phebe to enter the ministry. Without the benefit of a Divinity School education Phebe with her early classical education on Nantucket easily passed the rigorous standards for ordination. She was called to, installed and ordained, at the Universalist Church in Hingham MA in 1868. The position was half time. The claim is that she was the first woman ordained to Universalist ministry in New England. Olympia preached the Ordination Sermon. A year later Phebe took a second part time position as minister to the Waltham Mass Universalist Church. I subsequently learned at the Minister's Group that the Waltham Church still has a women's group called *The Phebe Hanford Society* in honor of their first woman minister. Finances were the consideration for the added parish work.

In April 1870 she was called to full time ministry in New Haven Conn at the First Universalist Church and Society. She signed on with a three-year contract: "at a salary of \$2000 and a bonus for moving of \$500." Her Installation Service befitting the occasion was a big event in the Lower Connecticut Valley. All the ministers in the area attended, many participated. Rev. William Garrison Haskell, a close friend and for whom she gave the Charge to the Minister just years earlier, delivered the Charge to the Minister for Phebe. He said in part:

I am not to tell you what you shall preach, or how you shall preach it, because I cannot do this. You know, or you will know ere long, the people to whom you minister, and will be best able to judge of their needs and to shape your preaching to those needs.... Christ in the world and not merely Christ going out of the world will need be preached.

And you will remember --the great work of Christian preaching is, to the end, that the world may be made a better place by it.

Ellen, Miss Miles, wrote the Closing Hymn. The third verse reads:

Unite us in the bonds of love,
Pastor and people guard and guide,
Within our hearts may thy sweet dove,
With folded wings, for aye abide.

And Julia Ward Howe, a friend, wrote the Installation Hymn. The last verse reads:

For here thy last deliverance stands
To loose the palsied spell of Fear,
And Woman, with unfettered hands,
Keeps thine accepted priesthood here.

Three years later in a pamphlet on the church's history Phebe wrote about her ministry in the third person:

It is now three years and five months since the present pastor entered upon her labors, and it does not become her to say aught which might savor of boasting, but in a spirit of devout and humble gratitude she is able to declare that according to the statistics of both Church and Society, there has been unexampled prosperity during this pastorate. The popular prejudice against attending a Universalist church has been so far overcome, that this large edifice has often been crowded to overflowing. Women are no longer ashamed to be seen at our meetings.

Phebe was called next in 1873 to the Universalist Church in Jersey City, New Jersey. Ellen moved with her. During this time Phebe also served the denomination in the local State

Convention of Universalists. Universalism was surprised when the Jersey City congregation did not renew Phebe's contract in 1876. The vote was close: 47-42. Not re-upping was other than the work she did, for that was outstanding, and it was more than about her involvement with the woman's right to vote movement or her extensive denominational responsibilities. Speculation suggests it was Miss Miles. The church fathers told Phebe Miss Miles or your ministry. Phebe chose Ellen and set up a "church across the street" where she continued to preach to large crowds about Universalism and on the circuit to large crowds about women's right to vote. In 1884 she returned to New Haven to minister there to the Church of the Holy Spirit Church. She retired from active ministry in 1890.

In an 1890 article in the *Woman's Journal* Phebe wrote about her experiences in the New Jersey pulpits:

If I were to write the full history of that 10 year's pastorate (with graphic descriptions of what some men said and did to hinder woman's work, and how angry some men were because I was a friend to woman suffrage, and would not renounce Sorosis, [a Woman's Club] which, being a woman's club, they felt must be an unfit place for a pastor); if I were to put in print some of letters then received signed and unsigned: if I were to tell what was said and done by men who thought themselves doing God service by blocking a woman's way — I should put before the public a book which would cause both laughter and tears. Perhaps to cast the mantle of oblivion over them would be the work of charity. Time heals many wounds, and I have lived to stand in the same pulpit again and preach the state sermon, and after all that opposition to represent the state in our National Universalist Convention."

Quote reprinted in an article in the *Jersey Journal* May 28, 1999 by Loretta Cody.

Women's Rights

From the 1860's on when she became active in the nascent Women's Right to Vote Movement until her death in 1921 Phebe was a leading activist in the movement. She was a delegate in 1869, one of twelve, to the Convention of Women's Suffrage in Cleveland. She was also an indefatigable speaker on the issue. Preserved in the collection of her papers at the Nantucket Historical Association we find a talk, *Women Soldiers*, written in Phebe's own hand. In that talk Phebe tells us that of all the "great questions that agitate the mind more or less, there is none more important than the question of suffrage for women." She tells us we are all called to this movement, that "Life is a glorious conflict and from the cradle to the grave we are all soldiers, some volunteer, some drafted, some professional, (?)...and when I say *we* I mean men and women." She continues the speech with a demand for equality based upon her religious belief in one loving God:

I have no tirade to utter against men nor am I inclined to undervalue my own sex. I do not believe in men's rights to the exclusion of women's, or in women's rights to the hindrance of men's I believe in human rights. We are all sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty subject to the same physical and moral laws.

Tetrault writes in *Historic Nantucket* 2002 that Phebe has not been properly celebrated for her work in the Women's Right to Vote movement, and more, she has even been lost among the "nationally more prominent profiles" of women like Stanton and Anthony.

I add Universalism has also lost sight of this remarkable woman.

Tetrault also tells us that the collection of Phebe's papers at the Nantucket Historical Association remedies her absence. *Women Soldiers* many pages long does that and gives a sense

of Phebe's passion for and stature in the movement. She gave the talk twenty times from 1870-1872 up and down the Eastern Seaboard from Swampscott, Mass to Sandy Hook, New Jersey. Twenty years later on May 2, 1895 Phebe rewrote and redelivered the talk.

The prayer below which she delivered at the Graveside Service she conducted for Elizabeth Cady Stanton also shows Phebe's passion for the work of and stature in the movement. Her Universalist theology and social activism come together in the prayer.

O Thou Infinite and Eternal Power whom so many of thy children love to call Our Father and Our Mother, into thy hands we commit the spirit of our beloved one, assured that all is right where thy rule extends.

Neither Stanton nor Anthony lived to see the 19th amendment to the Constitution passed, but Phebe did and Lucy Stone's daughter remembered her work and wrote to her in 1920:

Dear Mrs. Hanaford:

It gives me real pleasure today to think that you will be voting In thinking of the women to whom we owe [the vote] you come to my mind, and my grateful thoughts go out to you.

Cordially,

Alice Stone Blackwell

Theological Beliefs

Phebe venerated John Murray who preached Universalism in America when he arrived here in 1770. To her he *was* the "pioneer of Universalism in America." She refers to him in her

writing as “Father Murray” as did many others, and Hosea Ballou, primal thinker in the faith in the early 1800’s, as Father Ballou. Universalism had a paternalistic streak in these early years.

Phebe believed in an afterlife in the company of God and friends. In Funeral Services she wrote of grief and joy and the sweet by and by and that now the deceased is in a greater place than here on earth. This is what she wrote for Daniel Stodder Lincoln. Hingham, Mass. 1869.

The circumstances connected with the event which calls us together today, dear friends, are sad indeed. We are called to mourn with those who are almost shocked in their bereavement.... Earth is sad because of those who have gone before us; they shall be there to welcome us to our loving and blessed home.

And for Katie A. Hughes. New Haven, Conn. 1871

We have come here today, dear friends, with solemn gladness to this hour. The solemnity of this death changes for us and our beloved dead is not forgotten. The tears of natural grief cannot but fall sometime, yet beyond and above all our grief, we remember the parting injunction and request of our risen Katie that we should not mourn today-that we should remember for our comfort and joy that she had gone where the song of praise would be eternal and the flowers would never fade.

It was Phebe’s fervent hope that when she died she would meet face to face the great intellectual, Margaret Fuller.

Coda

In 1914 after Ellen died, Phebe went to live with her granddaughter, Dionis Coffin Santee. She left a strong message about how she saw her life. She was “sure in her faith that a larger work

awaited her in the Life Beyond.” She was satisfied that she would be “leaving the world a little happier, a little better because she has lived and worked in it.”

Phebe was integral to 19th century history making. For that we ought remember this lady and stand her beside other history makers of that century. We remember her this evening. May her story encourage our own stories, not that we would live our story in her detail, but that we would live our story in the deepest way, according to our own inner light and independence of mind. Nantucket Island hasn't forgotten her. Her bust is in the Great Hall of the Nantucket Atheneum.