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American Backgrounds

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American Background

The early pioneers who crossed the Mississippi into Iowa were men of many faiths. As settlements mushroomed in the Black Hawk Purchase, churches were quickly established — Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational, Baptist, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and others. There were many New Englanders in these pioneer settlements, and those from Massachusetts were especially active in founding the Unitarian Church in Iowa.

Unitarianism in the United States emerged from the older Congregational churches of New England. It appeared along with the movement that produced the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence. What these were in political and social thinking, Unitarianism was in religion. Each was first a revolt against overbearing and unquestioned authority over the masses of men. Whether that revolt was aimed at the state, as in the American Revolution, or at the church and its ministers, as in Unitarianism, it sprang from the belief that the rights of the indi-

vidual were inherent. In both revolts there lay an assertion of the dignity of the human soul.

It was not until 1796 that the name "Unitarian" was first used in connection with a Philadelphia church. Members of the first New England churches had preferred to call themselves Liberal Christians rather than Unitarians. By 1815, however, more than one hundred New England churches had split off from the older Puritan tradition of the Congregationalists. In 1819 their leader, William Ellery Channing of Boston, preached a sermon at Baltimore which Unitarians thereafter accepted as their creed. Six years later, in 1825, the American Unitarian Association was founded.

Although accepting the Channing doctrine, the Unitarians have never adopted a formal creed and do not require the profession of a particular doctrine from their members or ministers. They believe in one God in one person as distinguished from the Trinitarian belief in one God in three persons. They believe in the humanity of Jesus as contrasted with the belief in His deity. They believe in the essential dignity and perfectibility of human nature, the natural character of the Bible, and the hope for the ultimate salvation of all souls. The covenant generally used reads: "In the love of truth and in the spirit of Jesus, we unite for the worship of God and the service of man."

As pioneers moved westward they carried the

seed of Unitarianism with them to the frontier. In 1840, fifteen years after the formation of the American Unitarian Association, it had reached as far as Iowa. Unitarianism was not, however, a rural movement; its churches were planted mainly in larger towns, in Iowa as well as in the nation.

Between 1840 and 1870, as Iowa cities grew, an impetus was given Unitarianism by eastern men of letters who came west to lecture in frontier towns. These men, mostly Unitarians, became as well-known in Dubuque, Davenport, and Burlington as they were in New England. The Iowa pioneers not only knew something of such men as William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Theodore Parker from their Massachusetts neighbors, or from the news items in such papers as they had; they also welcomed some of these who came as lecturers on the lyceum platforms which flourished particularly in Mississippi River towns.

The story of those lyceums is a fascinating one. Emerson, a friend of Channing and a former Unitarian minister in Boston, made the lecture circuit in the Middle West several times. He first lectured in Iowa in 1855 when he crossed the river on the ice at Davenport on foot. After the Civil War he was back again, on a windy stormy night in January, 1866, when the windows and curtains in the lecture hall rattled so he was hardly heard.

Amos Bronson Alcott followed Emerson on the lecture platform in the seventies, lecturing at Dubuque, Davenport, Fort Dodge, Muscatine, Mount Pleasant, Ames, Cedar Rapids, and Iowa City. Alcott made a great hit in Iowa City in 1872 when he lectured in the Universalist Church, the minister of which was the Reverend Augusta Chapin. John P. Irish sponsored the undertaking. Alcott made at least a half dozen lecture tours among the Iowa communities, where both he and Emerson found traveling hard in the winter months, as they journeyed from one appointment to another. Emerson's *Journal*, for example, contains the story of one trip partly by horse and sleigh in an effort to get from Racine, Wisconsin, to Washington, Iowa — a big jump in those days. Much of the hardship was relieved, however, by the warm hospitality in the homes of New England families, where the distinguished visitors were often invited as guests.

But the organization of Unitarian churches in Iowa did not wait for the coming of the wise men from the East. The earlier Unitarian settlers were already accomplishing that with the help of itinerant missionaries who also found that Iowa prairies were "cold places on a cold day, especially to one whose face is northward." The stories of the Burlington and Keokuk churches are interesting chapters in the history of religion in Iowa.