

THE FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH IN PROVIDENCE

Antoinette F. Downing, 1966

The First Unitarian Church of Providence, built by John Holden Greene in 1816, is the third building for the First Congregational (now Unitarian) Church. It is a great architectural achievement and we are fortunate for its survival. Today I want to extol its architectural character and describe the tradition to which it belongs. To place it in history I shall want to tell about its plan, its architectural style, its decoration and the man who built it.

First then, the plan itself. This building, with its foretower and spire, oriented with the pulpit end to the east, and its main entry opposite, follows a traditional church plan inherited from the Church of England. But its auditorium is nearly square and this square plan has a history of religious protest to tell.

The dissenting congregations broke from the traditional building forms as well as old religious forms. To do this they built "preaching houses", - the gable roofed meeting houses with the entrance on the broad side and the pulpit opposite, or, sometimes, a hipped roof type, with a center turret like the Old Ship Meeting House in Hingham. In Rhode Island, the old Elder Ballou Meeting House in Cumberland, (1749) built for the six Principles Baptist Society (burned in the past ten years,) looked like a shingled gable roofed barn. Its main entrance on the broad side of the building led directly in to a single room with pulpit and elder's bench on the broad side opposite and the balcony built on three sides.

It is surprising to note that one of the earliest Episcopal Churches in Rhode Island, St. Paul's in Wickford, built in 1708, was built on this same plan with its handsome pedimented door set in the middle of the broad side of the building. This building you can still visit, and you can still visit the Sabbatarian Meeting House in Newport which is laid out in the same way. Before it was covered with brick for fire protection, this latter building looked like a very nice gable roofed house.

Our new carpet, chosen to relate the rich mahogany of the pulpit to the rest of the church and to set off the mahogany of the pew railings, probably brings the church back more nearly to the original color scheme than it has been since 1868. The pattern is essentially an Adamesque design, its open spacing is typical of other designs of the period.

In closing, I want to say that the building John Holden Greene always considered his most successful work, in spite of the pulpit change, stands today nearly as he knew it. Fate has seldom dealt as kindly with the works of man, and we who have inherited this work are privileged indeed that it has survived for us to know and love.

September 1966 Antoinette F. Downing

The toll taken by the disastrous fire of August 1967 has now been rectified. By a miracle our church has been spared to us and stands revealed in its original white splendor.

For many years he was an inhabitant of Providence, and he set the character of Providence building from 1809 when he built the Sullivan Dorr House with its unusual elevation and its Gothic detail to the brick mansions of 1830 and later.

This building, his masterpiece, is an almost perfect expression of its time. What does this mean? Let us look closely at the building itself, beginning with the facade and the spire. Greene's originality and strength are immediately evident. Stone was selected for the building material instead of wood, the more typical material, and the stone adds to the effect of strength. The colossal columns that support the great pediment of the portico are set against the square tower base, and these, together with the roundheaded window with Gothic mullions that cuts into the pediment, establish a bold quality and sense of vertical height. The sense of boldness and vertical height is further strengthened by the way the spire stages are handled, with the columns set forward and on an angle so that the vertical lines are dominant.

What lies back of this design? It is a story of Providence looking to Boston. For inspiration Greene turned to the designs of Charles Bulfinch in Boston. Asher Benjamin, the carpenter-architect of Greenfield, Massachusetts, was already publishing books reflecting Bulfinch's influence, and Greene evidently used these books. He also turned to books of earlier dates. Joseph Brown, his predecessor as a Providence architect, owned James Gibbs' Book of Architecture published in 1728, and, as we know Brown used it freely when he was designing the First Baptist Meeting House of 1775. Caleb Crasbee, who designed the 1795 Congregational Church that burned in 1810, inherited this book and Greene undoubtedly also had access to it. Our building shows the influence of Bulfinch, Benjamin and Gibbs. The New South Church, built in Boston by Bulfinch in 1814, evidently inspired Greene's general concept for his Providence Commission, just as he had been influenced by a Bulfinch building (the Federal Street Church of 1809) when he built St. John's in 1810, and as Caleb Crasbee

had been influenced by Bulfinch's Hollis Street Church when he built the first building on this site in 1795, a building that ultimately came from Wren's St. Paul's in London. But Greene's handling of facade and spire, described above, is more vigorous than Bulfinch's treatment for New South, and reflects the baroque character of Gibbs' work.

The tall two story windows in the auditorium have now supplanted the double row of windows common to the earlier churches from St. Paul's in Wickford to the First Baptist Meeting House in Providence. Bulfinch used two story windows in the Federal Street Church, and Greene adapted them for St. John's and for this building. They are cut by the balconies and they accord in design with the use of the four colossal columns to support the ceiling dome, which are also cut by the balconies.

This interior scheme of four columns supporting the domical ceiling was also used by Bulfinch in his Hollis Street Church in Boston, but it was ultimately inspired by Wren's St. Stephen's Holbrook, which Bulfinch admired especially.

Now it is time to say something about the delightful decorative detail; the paneling in the saucer dome; the delicate scale of the window frames; the fan shapes that fill the corners of the ceiling; the fine ceiling medallion; the row of rosettes around the dome base; the blind arch over the pulpit closed with panels and crowned with a fan; and the little Gothic colonettes that support the balcony and the Gothic feeling of the windows. All this detail is part of the lively vocabulary of the Federal period and much of it is derived from the work of the Adam brothers in England. In the first years of the nineteenth century American building style became more diversified than at any previous time. Throughout the eighteenth century the classically derived range of decorative motives had been limited, but by the beginning of the nineteenth century new sources - French, the comparatively recently discovered decorations in Pompeii and the furniture designs

of Chippendale all influenced decorative details. Architects, searching for variety, added Gothic, Chinese, Indian and Persian detail "called orders" to the books showing Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian and composite orders. They used them as decorative motifs in the traditional and typically symmetrical Georgian buildings. The Adam manner was characterized by its delicacy and lightness of detail, as we see it so well expressed here.

Thus this beautiful building, which has come down to us almost unchanged (or carefully restored), is an expression of Greene's own strong genius, and is also a part of the architectural tradition that had been handed down from England to the Colonies and made their own.

The organ case was designed by Thomas A. Tefft about 1850, but the pulpit is part of the original design. It stood on a platform, the removal of which is almost the only change that has occurred. The balcony type of pulpit belongs to an important group. The pulpit in New South Church was similar, except that it was closed at the base. Pulpits in the First Unitarian Church, Lancaster, Mass. (designed by Bulfinch) and the Unitarian Church in Mendon, Mass., (both balcony pulpits of this same type), are made of pine and painted. This pulpit was also to be of pine but as said earlier a group of young men in the church raised over \$400 so the design could be carried out in mahogany. The pulpit in the Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Georgia (designed by John Holden Greene after the Providence church in 1817-1819) is almost a duplicate of this pulpit and is also of mahogany.

And this brings me to the colors and the new carpet. The woodwork color is now approximately the same as that of the first paint color next the wood. The walls, now white again, were white until the redecoration of 1868. Church records show that the first carpet was laid in 1838, and that the congregation expressed relief for the ensuing quietness. This means that for thirty years wood tones predominated.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, NOW FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH

Address: 301 Benefit Street, southeast corner Benefit and Benevolent Streets, Providence, Providence County, Rhode Island.

An addendum to
First Congregational Church
Benefit and Benevolent Streets
Providence, Rhode Island
in HABS Catalog (1941).

**Present Owner
and Occupant:** First Unitarian Society,
Providence, Rhode Island.

Present Use: Church.

**Brief Statement
of Significance:**

This is a large, attractive stone church, built 1815-1816, and designed by an important Providence architect, John Holden Greene. Very few alterations have been made to the church, and the building Greene considered his most successful work survives nearly as he knew it.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION**A. Physical History**

1. Original and subsequent owners: The First Congregational Society which became Unitarian in 1821. It was then called The First Congregational Church, Unitarian. The name was changed in 1953 to First Unitarian Society.
2. Date of erection: Cornerstone laid May 29, 1815; church dedicated October 31, 1816.
3. Architect, builder, suppliers, etc.: Mason - Zechariah Chafee. Bell - Paul Revere and son, of Massachusetts. Said to be the largest ever cast by them. Clock - Simon Wallard supplied the clock and cleaned and repaired it. It was made in 1804. The building cost \$45,426.69 and with extras a total of \$48,000.00. The pulpit cost about \$500; the organ cost about \$1400; the bell cost about \$1100. Mr. Goodrich of Boston rebuilt the old organ for the new church for \$1400 - on the same plan and equal to the Brattle Street organ in Boston. /from the Church Records at Rhode Island Historical Society./