

Lemuel K. Washburn:  
The Atheist in Revere's Attic

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That the Founding Fathers were God-revering, pious Christians is a myth,<sup>2</sup> for many of them, including the Father of the Country, were deistic. None of the Founding Fathers denied the existence of god, but the god they believed in bore little resemblance to the Christian god.<sup>3</sup> "George Washington's practice of Christianity was limited and superficial," Barry Schwartz explained, "because he was not himself a Christian."<sup>4</sup> The Deists' concept of liberty, on which the United States was founded, derived from natural, not supernatural, rights. The Deists rejected dogma and in forming their religious beliefs relied instead on rational inquiry. In two free-thinking classics, *The Rights of Man* (1791) and *The Age of Reason* (1794-95), Thomas Paine (1731-1814)<sup>5</sup> asserted his belief in natural religion and attacked state-supported religions. The triumph of Christianity, he believed, was the triumph of ignorance and superstition. The Christian system, he said, "was only another species of mythology . . ."<sup>6</sup> Freedom of religion, he argued, is

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<sup>2</sup>For a freethinker's claims on Washington, Jefferson, Franklin and Paine, see part one of John E. Remsburg's *Six Historic Americans* (New York: Truth Seeker, 1906).

<sup>3</sup>For an illuminating history of deism during and after the Revolution, see G. Adolph Koch, *Republican Religion: The American Revolution and the Cult of Reason*, reprint (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1964).

<sup>4</sup>*George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 175. Morais argued that, because of conflicting evidence, it was impossible to say whether Washington was a freethinker or a believer. *Deism in Eighteenth Century America*, 114.

<sup>5</sup>Before Paine emigrated to America, there were native-born American freethinkers, such as Ethan Allen (1738-1789). But because Paine's output was so much greater and his influence more widespread and lasting, he has been viewed by freethinkers as the father of the Freethought movement in America.

<sup>6</sup>*The Age of Reason*, 80.

not really freedom unless it allows freedom *from* religion.

After the American Revolution, as the influence of Deism waned, there was a resurgence of religious enthusiasm. Deism, the so-called Republican religion, which had been so useful in making the Revolution, became an embarrassment after it, a scandalous reminder of America's blasphemous beginning as a nation. Deism became the skeleton in America's closet, and the bones were Paine's. "Paine was forced to endure a barrage of calumny and vituperation such as have been visited upon few men in our history," was how one historian put it.<sup>7</sup> Paine became an unwelcome reminder of what many Americans wanted to forget, namely that Thomas Paine was a freethinker,<sup>8</sup> a term which most Americans equated with atheist. Theodore Roosevelt reflected the attitude of many Christians when he later denounced Paine as a "filthy little atheist." By the end of the 1800s, Paine had become the atheist in the attic of American history.<sup>9</sup>

But Paine continued to inspire a handful of freethinkers in the late 1800s and in particular Robert Ingersoll (1833-1899). A Civil War veteran and the son of a Congregationalist minister, Ingersoll was a devoted husband and father, a successful corporate lawyer, an effective Illinois attorney general, and an influential figure in the Republican Party. Celebrated for his oratorical skills, in 1876 he gave the nominating speech for James G. Blaine at the Republican national convention. He could have gone far in public life if he had not been a disciple of Thomas Paine. "With his name left out," Ingersoll said in a lecture on Paine, "the history of liberty cannot be written."<sup>10</sup> In hundreds of public lectures in nearly every state in the union, from his first, in 1860,<sup>11</sup> to his last, in Boston, in 1899, Ingersoll praised Paine and denounced Christianity as a vicious hoax.

If Paine is now nearly forgotten, Ingersoll is even more so. The most famous American freethinker of the nineteenth century is not part of our collective memory. He is a footnote in today's college curriculum. "Unfortunately," an Ingersoll admirer recently wrote, "all too many

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<sup>7</sup>Philip S. Foner, Introduction, *The Age of Reason*, (New York: Citadel, 1991) 35.

<sup>8</sup>See Koch, *Republican Religion*, 284, f. 120.

<sup>9</sup>Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (London: Oxford U. P., 1976) 266-267.

<sup>10</sup>Robert G. Ingersoll, *On the Gods and Other Essays*, Preface by Paul Kurtz (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1990) 59.

<sup>11</sup>"Col. Ingersoll's Lecture on Thomas Paine," in *Mistakes of Ingersoll* (Chicago, 1886) 117.

Americans have forgotten America's leading agnostic."<sup>12</sup> Older Americans are more likely to recall that there was once an Ingersoll watch than that there was once an Ingersoll freethinker. In a scholarly evaluation of his life and work published in 1972, a detached observer concluded Ingersoll had been cast into obscurity.<sup>13</sup>

If a major figure like Paine is ignored, and his disciple Ingersoll cast into obscurity, we could hardly expect that Lemuel Kelley Washburn (1846-1927), one of Ingersoll's followers, a disciple of the disciple, would be remembered even in Revere, Massachusetts, where he had occupied the pulpit of the meetinghouse, in 1874, and where he had continued to live, enveloped in controversy for almost a half century. Born in Wareham, a small town near Cape Cod, in March 1846, the son of Charles F. and Eliza Macomber, Washburn began his career as a Unitarian minister, in 1870, for the Liberal Christian Society, in Ipswich, Massachusetts.<sup>14</sup> The following year he was minister of the Second Congregational Meeting House on Nantucket Island. In 1872 and 1873, he was minister of the newly organized First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis.<sup>15</sup> It was perhaps in Minnesota that he fell under the influence of Ingersoll, whom he would later hail as the greatest living American.<sup>16</sup> In one lecture, "Two Models for the Twentieth Century – Jesus and Ingersoll," Washburn compared the two, much to the disadvantage of Jesus. "Jesus was an ignorant, superstitious peasant," Washburn declared, whereas Ingersoll was "one of the best, greatest, grandest and most glorious men that ever lived . . ."<sup>17</sup> Washburn also idolized Paine, who became a favorite subject for his speeches and articles. In a Fourth of July oration in 1887, he credited Paine with creating the climate of opinion that had made separation from England possible. "We should write his name on mountain and stream, baptize cities and towns with it," Washburn declaimed.<sup>18</sup> In another address, he

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<sup>12</sup>Paul Kurtz, Preface, *On the Gods and Other Essays* 9.

<sup>13</sup>David D. Anderson, *Robert Ingersoll* (New York: Twain Publishers, 1972) 131.

<sup>14</sup>I have been unable to learn where Washburn was educated.

<sup>15</sup>Washburn's early career can be traced in the *Year-Book of the Unitarian and Congregational Churches* from 1871 to 1877.

<sup>16</sup>Who is the Greatest Living Man?" *Is the Bible Worth Reading and Other Essays* (New York: Truth Seeker Co. [1911]) 219-221.

<sup>17</sup>*Boston Investigator* (9 Feb. 1901) 1.

<sup>18</sup>Address Delivered at Onset, July 4th, 1887, *Boston Investigator* (1 Dec. 1900) 3.

said Paine ranked higher than any other hero of the Revolution.<sup>19</sup> He ranked Paine not only higher than George Washington but also, in *Jesus and Paine* (1903), higher than Jesus, which is not surprising since he had already accorded Ingersoll the same status.

When Washburn returned east in 1874 to preach in the First Church, in Revere, he was not yet an atheist, but he was still too radical for some in the congregation. There were those on the left wing of the Unitarian movement – in that small group Conrad Wright, borrowing Henry W. Bellows's classifications, called Radical Unitarians<sup>20</sup> – who were not satisfied with doing away with the doctrines and practices dear to the Calvinists, such as the trinity, innate depravity, and predestination. They wanted to go even further. These infidels, as they were often called, wanted to do away with God and Christianity and replace them with a faith in science and humanity. Washburn was one of those infidels. It was probably his radicalism that led the Unitarian Society of Revere to decline to settle him his first year, and led the Massachusetts Unitarian Association to refuse to give its usual \$200.00 annual contribution to the First Church.

Unitarian officials had strong reservations about Washburn when he arrived in Revere, but he was popular with at least some of his parishioners. Tall and handsome, with a powerful voice, he contrasted sharply with many of the Unitarian ministers who had preceded him in the First Church pulpit. He obviously did not feel he was cut out of the same cloth as the milquetoast men who became Unitarian ministers. "Every time a minister is made a man is lost," he said on one occasion.<sup>21</sup> As a husband and a father of a daughter, he gallantly defended the "weaker" sex by supporting women's rights. It is easy to imagine that the women of the First Church found him a refreshing change from what they were used to. *The Chelsea Telegraph & Pioneer* wrote of him at the time, "Under the pastorate of the Rev. L. K. Washburn, the Unitarian Society has greatly prospered, the seats are free, and the church is realizing deserved success."<sup>22</sup> Uniting behind Washburn, some members of the Unitarian Society quickly raised \$1300.00 by subscription, a show of support that apparently caused the Massachusetts Unitarian Association to reverse itself and make its annual \$200.00 donation. In spite of the A.U.A.'s reversal, divisiveness continued during Washburn's ministry at the First Church. Two factions formed after he arrived, one enthusiastically for and the other strongly

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<sup>19</sup>"Thomas Paine – The Man," *Boston Investigator* (8 Feb. 1902) 5.

<sup>20</sup>Wright, *A Stream of Light*, 71-72.

<sup>21</sup>*Is the Bible Worth Reading*, 183.

<sup>22</sup>(15 May 1875) 2.

opposed to him. His supporters dominated the parish committee, which made him the settled minister of the church in 1875, but the anti-Washburnites, as they were referred to in the newspapers, refused to accept the decision of the parish committee.

A sermon Washburn preached in the meetinghouse early in March 1877 showed why he disturbed the conservative members of the congregation. In the opening of "False and True Prayer," Washburn called prayer an "unnatural and abnormal" activity, and he implied that those who indulged in it were spiritual free-loaders who were looking for something for nothing. "God takes no bribe," he said, "and when he refuses to answer our prayers, let us take the hint." History was pregnant with progress, and Washburn, like the atheistic village doctor, was eager to deliver the future. The means of delivery was not prayer but scientifically informed action. The Freethought movement in the United States was tied directly to advances in science, which became the rock on which the faith of radicals like Washburn rested.<sup>23</sup> He believed that everyone who worked to advance the material, intellectual and cultural well-being of humanity was doing far more good than all the prayers that had ever been uttered. He wanted to wean Americans away from their dependence on prayer and to get them to rely more on themselves, and on other people, in solving life's problems. Be productive, not prayerful, he urged. "There is no need of prayer," he concluded his sermon, "if we are willing to work."<sup>24</sup>

Judging from "False and True Prayer," which was his first published sermon, Washburn's religion around the year 1877 was pragmatic and humanistic. He had no use for prayer, and he showed a reluctance to worship God ("As man learns to trust God he gets off his knees"), but he goes all out in the sermon for humanity. In the same church where the first minister, Thomas Cheever, had preached the Puritan doctrine of innate depravity, Washburn told his listeners, "I revere humanity and its noble men and women."<sup>25</sup> He sought to liberate the creative energies of Americans, who for centuries had been wasting too much time and energy on sectarian disputes. What America needed, he insisted, were men on their toes, not on their knees. His promotion of action and experimentation over prayer and religion was in keeping with the ambitious spirit of capitalism in the late 1800s, when America was on the verge of becoming the greatest economic force in the world. Washburn looked to the scientist, not Jesus, as humanity's savior. "Science is the hope of the world," he wrote, "the only savior that

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<sup>23</sup>See Sidney Warren, *American Freethought, 1860-1910*, reprint (New York: Gordian Press, 1966) 44.

<sup>24</sup>*False and True Prayer* (Boston, 1877) 6, 9, 12.

<sup>25</sup>*False and True Prayer*, 9.

humanity has had down the ages or will have as man lives on through the centuries."<sup>26</sup>

Washburn's message in "False and True Prayer" could be summed up in the old saw that God helps those who help themselves, but for him to have specifically criticized prayer as not only useless but also a form of spiritual panhandling could not help but offend the orthodox, for whom prayer was not only a source of comfort and hope but a sacred activity. The town had changed, and there was now a class of people engaged in business and the professions who appreciated his no-nonsense views, but the majority of residents still looked at life through the rear-view mirror. His radicalism, his seeming blasphemy, were bound to upset the conservative members of the Unitarian congregation and to prove beyond doubt to members of the rival Evangelical church across the road what they had long suspected – that Unitarianism was the first step on the road to atheism.

Washburn's radicalism appears to have been inspired not only by Paine and Ingersoll but also by John Fiske, who popularized the evolutionary ideas of Darwin and Herbert Spencer in America. Fiske presented his ideas in a book called *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy*, which was published in 1874, the year that Washburn returned to Massachusetts. Fiske's use of Cosmic led to the adoption of the term "Cosmian" by many freethinkers. Washburn even published a hymn book, *Cosmian Hymns*, for liberal and ethical societies, in 1888.<sup>27</sup> Fiske was denounced by believers for his denial of an anthropomorphic god, but some freethinkers, including Ingersoll, also criticized him for what they saw as his attempt to reconcile religion with evolution. Washburn's own transition from Unitarian to freethinker did not take place overnight, and religious and freethinking ideas or attitudes appear to have overlapped in his mind for some time. Fiske may have been Washburn's halfway house between religion and atheism. Even his compilation of a hymn book suggests that he was not able to do without some of the props of orthodox religion during his transition from Unitarianism to atheism.

In "The Religion of To-Day," delivered in the First Church in April 1877, Washburn attacked Christianity even more boldly than he had in his inaugural sermon the previous month. "I believe the first step towards a better religion is to get rid of the make-believe religion that today haunts every church in the land," he began. "This world deserves

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<sup>26</sup>*False and True Prayer*, 107.

<sup>27</sup>"It is really too bad that human beings are compelled to sing such lies as we find in the pious song-books of the church," Washburn wrote. "The sentiments contained in them are not fit for savages." *Is the Bible Worth Reading*, 29. See in the same book, "Singing Lies," 64-65.

a better religion than Christianity." The true religion, he went on, was the religion of humanity, which most Christians were intolerant of. Catholics and Protestants alike were bigoted, he said, and persecute those who disagree with them. Much of "The Religion of To-Day" is taken up with the persecution that Christ underwent for his beliefs. Since Washburn at the time was under sharp attack by those who disagreed with his ideas, it is possible he felt identified with the persecuted Jesus, although there was much about the Christian savior that he could not accept, as he hinted at when he said he saw no value in following Jesus, or of living as he did.<sup>28</sup>

Washburn's opponents were led by a local justice of the peace, Charles Bird, who issued a warrant allowing Washburn's foes to set up a rival parish committee, which promptly voted to dismiss him as minister. This rival committee, in an effort to frustrate Washburn and his followers from using the meetinghouse, had the lock changed and voted to have no services in the summer of 1877. But Washburn and his supporters reportedly gained entrance with a skeleton key. In May, Washburn and his supporters confronted anti-Washburnites in the church, and a sort of tag-team wrestling match occurred in which one team was led by the minister and the other by the justice-of-the-peace. Though feelings had often run high among the factions in the First Church in its hundred and fifty year history, the meetinghouse had never been the scene of a physical struggle. Parishioners had often wrestled with the devil but never with each other.

Accusing Bird of having started the wrestling match, Washburn brought him into court. Meanwhile, the rival parish committee was trying to force Washburn out of the church. Early in June, Washburn's opponents announced that Warren H. Cudworth, the minister from East Boston and a pillar of orthodox Unitarianism, would preach the next week in the First Church, but Washburn warned that he had no intention of vacating the pulpit for Cudworth or anyone else. The meetinghouse was packed that Sunday. Just as hundreds of fight fans flocked to barns near Revere Beach to see illegal boxing matches between Irish-American boxers, hundreds of people crowded the First Church to see feuding Unitarians wrestle with each other. What was at stake was whose ideas of religion would prevail in the First Church – those of Thomas Paine or those of Warren H. Cudworth. Washburn was first in the pulpit and he challenged anyone to try to remove him from it. Nobody took up the challenge. To the disappointment of some, a Unitarian donnybrook was averted. No punches were thrown, no noses broken. The bitter struggle between the two factions shifted from the meetinghouse to the courts.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>(Boston, 1877) 6.

<sup>29</sup>*Chelsea Telegraph & Pioneer* (6 June 1877) 2.

The anti-Washburnites petitioned the Massachusetts State Supreme Court to enjoin Washburn and his followers from taking possession of the meetinghouse or from hindering other members of the church from using it for worship. The court granted the petitioners the injunction they sought, in effect legalizing the rival parish committee's existence and invalidating Washburn's claim that he was still the lawful minister.<sup>30</sup> Washburn and his followers established a splinter group, the First Independent Society, and conducted services of their own in the Revere Town Hall. Washburn also sued the Revere Unitarian Society for his full annual salary, even going so far as attaching the old meetinghouse on a \$2,000.00 suit for breach of contract. The church had not had so controversial a minister since the footloose and double-dealing Scotch-Irishman William McClenachan more than a century earlier.

In July 1877, at a meeting of what was called the "legal parish committee of the First Church," that is of the anti-Washburnites, it was decided to hold no services for two more months but to use the time instead to paint the meetinghouse inside and out. While the repairs were no doubt needed, keeping the meetinghouse closed for additional months was probably an attempt to prevent Washburn and his followers from conducting services. When services were resumed in the fall, the church had a new pastor, Henry J. Jenks (1877-1879), who had graduated from Harvard in 1863 and from the Harvard Divinity School in 1866. A gentleman and a scholar, Jenks became a member of the Massachusetts Historical Society. However, when the church attempted to summon the congregation to hear Jenk's first sermon, it was discovered that somebody – possibly a malicious follower of Washburn's – had removed the clapper from the bell, the same bell it had taken the poor church over a century to acquire. An enterprising member of the congregation got a hammer, which substituted for the clapper. The bell was hammered, the congregation assembled, and Jenks preached his inaugural sermon, taking as his text, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me do?"<sup>31</sup>

After 1877, Washburn no longer called himself a Unitarian, and neither did the American Unitarian Association, which expunged his name permanently from the list of ministers it published annually.<sup>32</sup> For

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<sup>30</sup>*Chelsea Telegraph & Pioneer* (23 June, 1877) 3.

<sup>31</sup>*Chelsea Telegraph & Pioneer* (20 Oct. 1877) 2.

<sup>32</sup>Warren, *American Freethought*, points out (102) that the Unitarians expelled those ministers who adhered to the most extreme Free Religionist doctrines. Washburn may have been expelled or he may have simply resigned from the Unitarians.



a few years, he preached in Revere as the minister of the First Independent Society. In 1879, there was a report in a local newspaper that he had been retained for another year by that group, which continued to hold its services in the town hall. If the First Independent Society had hopes of building their own church in Revere, those hopes were not realized. The handful of followers Washburn had managed to attract had all they could do to pay him a modest salary. The town that he had seemed to have taken by storm a few years before now began to look like his Waterloo, especially after his wife and daughter died of diphtheria in January 1878.<sup>33</sup> Washburn may have been thinking of his daughter when he said, years later, "Many of us have left the graves of father and mother behind, perhaps the smaller graves of children, where some of our heart lies buried too."<sup>34</sup> Not long afterwards, in what may have been an effort to pick up the pieces of his life, he preached briefly at the Oxford Street Chapel, in the neighboring city of Lynn. In April 1880, in its listing of the following Sunday's services, the *Lynn Reporter* mentioned that he would be preaching on "The Religious Outlook." That outlook could not have been encouraging, as far as he was concerned, for the following year he was listed in the *Lynn City Directory* as being in the medicine business, and the year following that in the candy business. In 1880, he married Isadore F. Swift, and the couple had a daughter, Mabel F. Washburn, in February 1882.

In the meanwhile, the religious outlook at the First Church was murky at best. Jenks left in 1880 and was replaced by James H. Wiggin, who stayed not much more than a year before being replaced by Granville Pierce. Unlike Jenks, neither Wiggin or Pierce had attended Harvard, but Pierce admired the radical Harvard Divinity School graduate Theodore Parker (1810-1860), who had charged that the Christian church was in a state of decay and its god dead.<sup>35</sup> Pierce even invited Washburn back to the church to give a Sunday evening talk that the *Revere Journal* characterized as a radical attack upon Christian belief.<sup>36</sup>

After giving selling medicine and candy a try in Lynn in the early 1880s, the enterprising Washburn had turned to selling real estate in Revere, where he enjoyed more success. He did what Horatio Alger, Sr., had failed to do in Revere earlier in the century – make money from

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<sup>33</sup>*Chelsea Telegraph & Pioneer* ((26 Jan. 1878), 2. Other than this one newspaper report, I have found no other references to what would have been Washburn's first marriage.

<sup>34</sup>*Is the Bible Worth Reading*, 14.

<sup>35</sup>Theodore Parker, *Theism, Atheism and Popular Theology*, ed. Charles W. Wendte (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1911) 11-12.

<sup>36</sup>(14 Jan. 1882) 3.

the sale of land that had once been part of the large allotments of Henry Vane, Governor Winthrop, Robert Keayne, and others. From the time he bought and sold his first piece of real estate, in 1886, to his last sale, in 1920, Washburn was involved in many land transactions, often with the pillars of the community.

Being a real estate agent did not soften his views on religion. On the contrary, those views grew more extreme. He was no doubt the most radical realtor in Revere, if not in the United States. He continued to be a fervent disciple of Ingersoll. Like his master, he rejected an afterlife and embraced earthly life enthusiastically. While not a hedonist, he wanted no part of Puritan denial. He believed, as Ingersoll did, in physical as well as spiritual love. "Whoever loves and is loved," Ingersoll said, "embraces and is embraced, thrills and is thrilled – his cup of joy is filled."<sup>37</sup>

In a lecture he delivered before the Ingersoll Society in Boston in 1886 (the same year he began his real estate activities), Washburn showed how far he had moved from Unitarianism since he had been ousted from the First Church nearly ten years earlier. In "Sunday and 'the Sabbath,'" he called God and Jesus "shadowy" individuals and the Sabbath the particular day on which ministers and Sunday school teachers have license to poison the minds of children, a far cry from Charles Greenwood, a Unitarian advocate, who had looked to Sunday Schools as the hope of the world. "I believe," Washburn said, "there is no place where a child can receive more moral and spiritual detriment in an hour than he receives in an ordinary Sabbath School." He even defended the Sabbath-breaking of the newsboys, while managing to take another swipe at the churches. "It is considered pious for the church to take up a collection on Sunday, but a crime for a poor newsboy to sell a Sunday paper."<sup>38</sup>

In July 1894, while vacationing in North Conway, New Hampshire, Washburn found a lithograph of Ingersoll hidden out of sight on the wall behind an ice chest. Taking his daughter Mabel, who was then thirteen, he went and gathered evergreens to wreath the lithograph, which he hung in a prominent place. "Infidels like to have their heroes acknowledged as well as Christians," he explained, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, "and rebel when they see slight cast upon one whom they love and respect."<sup>39</sup> By the early 1890s, Washburn was recognized as one of Ingersoll's most influential disciples.

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<sup>37</sup>C. H. Cramer, *Royal Bob: The Life of Robert G. Ingersoll*. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952) 61.

<sup>38</sup>(Boston, 1886) 8, 9, 10.

<sup>39</sup>*Boston Investigator* (18 Aug. 1894) 4.

If Washburn was a freethinker in his religious views, in other respects he was no more radical than other "progressive businessmen," to use the *Revere Journal's* favorite term in the 1880s for local businessmen who favored unrestricted development. In "Sunday and the 'Sabbath,'" he expressed faith in the same things that those businessmen did – free enterprise, free elections, and the American future. Daniel Howe's point that Unitarianism had an affinity with capitalism is borne out by Washburn's career in Revere, where he maintained close ties with the business class of the town, even after he had been expelled from the First Church.

To disseminate his anti-religious views, Washburn wanted more than the lecture hall and the occasionally published pamphlet. In the 1880s and 1890s, newspapers reached the widest audience, so he watched for his opportunity, which came with the death of Horace Seaver, longtime editor of the *Boston Investigator*,<sup>40</sup> a freethinking weekly founded in 1833 and "Devoted," as its masthead stated, "to the promotion of universal mental liberty." The September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1889, issue was the first Washburn edited. In his inaugural editorial, he promised to fight Christianity, "this enemy of mankind, at all times, as a duty which I owe to my race."<sup>41</sup> He remained connected with the paper for over ten years, and in that time, while still living in Revere,<sup>42</sup> wrote many articles and editorials.<sup>43</sup>

Some of those editorials and articles reflected Washburn's preoccupation with the role of women in religion. Without the devotion and work of women, he argued, Christianity could not survive. When it comes to self-sacrifice, women put Christ to shame, he believed, since Christ's alleged crucifixion lasted at most hours while women usually suffer their whole lives, especially in marriage, where they are treated worse than servants. In his quarrel with the Christian Father and Son, Washburn was aware of what would later be called the sexual politics of

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<sup>40</sup>Along with *The Index* (1870) and *The Truth Seeker* (1873), *The Investigator* was one of the most important freethinking weeklies in the United States. Warren, *American Freethought*, 22-23.

<sup>41</sup>(2 Oct. 1889) 3.

<sup>42</sup>The U.S. Census of 1900 shows him living in Revere with his wife, Isadore, and daughter, Mabel. See the *U.S. Census*, vol. 84, sheet 28, line 60.

<sup>43</sup>A number of the pieces he wrote for the paper were later republished as pamphlets. *The National Union Catalogue* lists some nineteen pamphlets by Washburn, including ones with such titles as "The Brute God of the Old Testament," "The False Teaching of the Christian Church," and "The Foolishness of Prayer."

religion. "The God of Christianity is a father, its savior is a young man, and its angels are all of the masculine gender," he pointed out in "A Woman's Religion." His criticism of Christianity as a patriarchal religion anticipated the more sophisticated critiques later made by feminists. "We have had essentially a *male* civilization," he declared.<sup>44</sup> But patriarchal religion, of which, he argued, Catholicism is a conspicuous example, seeks to seduce and enslave women. "Religion was invented to catch women," he wrote. "The priest is the spider and the woman the fly."<sup>45</sup> A mother's love, he pointed out, disproves the dour view of human nature propounded by Calvinists. "Every kiss of love imprinted by a mother's lips on the face of her babe gives the lie to the Christian doctrine of total depravity," he wrote.<sup>46</sup> But the elevation of the mother of God to the status of a near deity by the Catholics did not mean Catholic males were any less sexist. The idolization of Mary notwithstanding, Catholics do not revere the mother, he claimed, because a "man who prostrates his mind before a carved figure of the 'Virgin Mary' and pounds his wife and kicks his daughter into the street has reverence for nothing."<sup>47</sup>

Washburn's championing of women did not mean he believed they were equal to men. Like many men, he believed women were by nature emotional and naive. In one editorial, he discussed their limitations, especially their inability to resist the blandishments of priests and preachers. Religion would wither away, he said, if it were not for the slavish devotion of weak-minded women. One reason for his dislike for men of the cloth, it should be noted, was that they were too much like women. Women were weaker not only physically but mentally, and men who were like them helped perpetuate religion. "It is probable," he wrote in the editorial, "that the a time will come when the only believers in religion will be women and feminine men."<sup>48</sup>

Washburn's atheism was not free from sexism and homophobia, but under his editorship the *Boston Investigator's* overriding mission was not to criticize women and feminine men, because they were after all only victims. Its overriding mission was to denounce Christianity, and Catholicism in particular. Before he left the paper, in 1894, an unsigned statement appeared in it which he may have written: "We oppose all kinds of Christianity," it read, "every sect, every denomination, every

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<sup>44</sup>*Boston Investigator* (18 Aug. 1894) 4.

<sup>45</sup>*Is the Bible Worth Reading*, 197-198.

<sup>46</sup>*Is the Bible Worth Reading*, 182.

<sup>47</sup>*Is the Bible Worth Reading*, 125.

<sup>48</sup>(7 Sept. 1901) 4.

church. We oppose Romanism more than unitarianism because we hold that it is more dangerous to the nation."<sup>49</sup> A lecture he delivered in Boston in 1888 under *Boston Investigator* auspices was bluntly titled "Catholic Menace to Our Government." In a display of evenhandedness, he gave a lecture to the Ingersoll Society the following year titled "Protestant Menace to Our Government." But it is clear from his other writings that he considered the Catholic Church the greatest menace. In 1890, he cited a survey that showed a child *trained* by Catholics (he refused to concede that Catholic children were being *educated*) was three times as likely to end up in jail as a child educated in free American schools.<sup>50</sup> Washburn was probably the author of the editorial denouncing Catholic schools that contained the line. "There is no greater evil . . . than the parochial school – a school where the priest fetters the mind of a child."<sup>51</sup>

Washburn's dislike of Catholics no doubt stemmed from the large numbers of poor and uneducated Irish and Italian Catholics who were reproducing at an alarming rate in the slums of Boston and dispersing throughout the metropolitan area, including Revere, in the 1890s. When there was a temporary slowing of the high Irish-Catholic birthrate, he wrote, "This is encouraging."<sup>52</sup> He may have had the Irish-Catholics in mind when he said, in another essay, "The most worthless things in Nature are the most prolific."<sup>53</sup> The Irish had been the first immigrant group to move into Revere in large numbers. In 1855, the population of the town was only 793. Of this number, 198, or 25%, were foreign born. The Irish alone accounted for 20% of the foreign-born. By the end of the century, Italian Catholics and Jews from Eastern Europe were beginning to pour into the town, joining the large number of Irish-Americans.

In 1897, when the Revere town hall burned down, the Protestant town fathers used the groundbreaking ceremonies, in 1898, and the dedication of the completed building, in 1899, to reaffirm the Protestant character of Revere and America. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, an outspoken champion of Americanism and a critic of unrestricted immigration, was chosen to make the speech at the groundbreaking. The dedication of the completed town hall, several years later, in January 1899, provided the town fathers with another opportunity to

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<sup>49</sup>(14 July 1894) 4.

<sup>50</sup>*Boston Investigator* (2 April 1890) 3.

<sup>51</sup>(30 June, 1894) 4.

<sup>52</sup>(7 July 1894) 4.

<sup>53</sup>*Is the Bible Worth Reading*, 17.

make a political statement about the future of the town, and they did not let it pass. The Dedication Committee did the conventional thing when it invited the mayor of Boston, Josiah Quincy, to make the opening remarks, but it did a boldly unconventional thing when it invited Washburn to make the main speech.

Although he had sympathy for the servant and laboring classes, Washburn was no anarchist or socialist. However, in the eyes of the orthodox clergy of Revere he was no less dangerous since he continued to denounce Christianity as a crime against humanity. Not surprisingly, most orthodox clergy in Revere were up in arms over the selection of the editor of an "infidel" newspaper as the dedication speaker. The pastors of the Congregational and the Baptist churches said they would boycott the dedication exercises, and they urged their congregations to do the same. J. P. Bixby, who had been pastor of the Congregational Church for many years but was now the president of a local Bible college, led the opposition to Washburn. Bixby was quoted in the *Boston Herald* as saying, "It is a reproach to the town of Revere to select Mr. Washburn, who represents only infidelity, agnosticism and Ingersollism. To select him to take the most prominent part in the celebration is an injustice to the moral and religious history of Revere."<sup>54</sup> Ironically, one pastor in town who declined to condemn Washburn was a Catholic, Father James Lee, of the Immaculate Conception Church, who said Christian charity required that he not judge someone he knew little about. One other pastor who declined to criticize him was S. L. Elberfeld, the new young minister of the First Church, from which Washburn had been expelled in 1877. Elberfeld had been selected to deliver the invocation at the dedication of the new town hall.

The Dedication Committee defended their choice of Washburn as featured speaker. An unidentified member of the Revere board of selectmen told the *Boston Herald* that Washburn's religious views were not relevant. The committee wanted to get the best speaker in Revere, and Washburn was that person. An unidentified member of the Dedication Committee said, "I think it is ungracious that the selection of Mr. Washburn should be so severely criticized." Some unidentified writer at the *Boston Herald* concurred with this view. "There's no doubt that Revere has secured the services of an eloquent orator in the Rev. Lemuel K. Washburn for the dedication of her new town hall. . . He has been eloquent from his youth up."<sup>55</sup> It was probably no accident that these defenders of Washburn were unidentified, nor was it an oversight that the Dedication Committee waited until shortly before the ceremonies to announce that he was their choice as speaker, for

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<sup>54</sup>(1 Jan. 1899) 3.

<sup>55</sup>A *Boston Herald* report quoted in the *Revere Journal* (14 Jan. 1899) 2.

feelings against him by churchgoers in the town ran high. If Bixby was right, there were proportionally more churchgoers in Revere in 1899 – and eleven more churches – than there had been eighteen years earlier when Washburn had been removed from the First Church. The population of the town had doubled since 1877, but the number of churchgoers, Bixby claimed, had increased five-fold.

In spite of this increase in the number of churches and churchgoers, the Dedication Committee had still chosen the freethinking Washburn as the main speaker. Choosing Washburn may have been the town fathers' way of saying that they preferred a nondenominational future to a continuation of the town's – and the nation's – contentious, creedal past. The town fathers probably would not have seen it as a sign of progress if in the next eighteen years there were yet another eleven churches in town – especially if most of them were Catholic and Jewish. Without sharing Washburn's atheism, they welcomed his emphasis on progress and prosperity, and on reason and utility. "The true value of everything," Washburn had said to the Ingersoll Society in 1886, "is its value to man."<sup>56</sup> They would have appreciated, too, his emphasis on service rather than salvation. In stressing the obligation to serve mankind rather than the selfish desire to achieve individual salvation, Washburn spoke the language of the town fathers, most of whom were Masons. So instead of seeing Washburn as the apostate the orthodox clergy painted him as, the town fathers viewed him as a hero, as the voice of reason and common sense. Driven out of the First Church<sup>57</sup> as a heretic in 1877, Washburn was invited back, to the new town hall, in 1899, a prophet of the new order.

In addition to Washburn's being asked to give the dedication speech, there was another strong indication that he was respected in secular circles in the town: his wife was an influential member of the Revere's Women's Club, which she served as president of three year's running, from 1901 to 1904. That the wife of an outspoken atheist could lead a respectable group of women suggests that Revere in the so-called Progressive Era of American history was more complex sociologically than we might otherwise think. If the men who controlled the town politically and economically were afraid of any group, it was not freethinkers but immigrants. With his sharp criticism of immigrants, Washburn would have been a welcome change from ministers who

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<sup>56</sup>"Sunday and the 'Sabbath,'" 14.

<sup>57</sup>See the obituary for Isadore F. Washburn (1853-1939) in the *Revere Journal* (15 June 1939) 3.

preached love thy neighbor, even if those neighbors were intemperate, prolific, and clannish Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants. Washburn would have made the town fathers feel they were under no obligation to love their neighbors if those neighbors were corrupting American civilization.

In an account he wrote of a conversation with a local judge he knew, Washburn offered a revealing glimpse into the religious attitudes of some of the leading men of Revere. He and the judge had been strolling on Revere Beach one summer Sunday when the judge decided he needed to get a shave. Washburn reminded him it was Sunday, so any barber practicing his trade on that day would be subject to a fine for violating the Sunday law. When Washburn asked the judge if he would fine a barber who was brought into court for violating the law, the judge replied he would have to, even though he thought it was asinine. Washburn claimed there were many successful men, like the judge, who thought religion was asinine but felt they had to go along with it. "These [men] form the greater part of the congregations in our cities," Washburn wrote, "living in friendly relations with men whose convictions they despise."<sup>58</sup> If Washburn's estimate of the majority of congregations being non-believers was accurate, then the increase in the number of church-goers the Rev. Bixby cited was probably offset somewhat by the number of men who went to church for appearance's sake.

Speaking from a stage flanked by large paintings depicting Paul Revere's ride, and toward the cost of which he himself had contributed ten dollars, Washburn delivered his dedication speech at the Town Hall. He did not directly criticize religion, for he was well aware that he was not addressing the Ingersoll Society. He did not say, as he had elsewhere before freethinkers, that "Christianity is a heartless religion, a cruel faith, a selfish scheme [that] is for those who care more about being saved than saving others"; he did not say that science had done more for humanity in twenty years than Christianity had in two thousand; he did not say the Bible was a "harmful, pernicious book for children, created by ignorant, uncultured, unrefined men," or that it was "the most obscene and immoral book" in his library; he did not say that the ministry appeals to young men who have a taste for reading and loafing; and he did not say to his Revere audience, which would have included some Irish-Catholics, "What a poor business Roman Catholicism would do among men if it advertised to save only those who were temperate, upright, intelligent and moral." He did not say any of these things on this occasion, although he had at others.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>"Editorial," *Boston Investigator* (13 July 1901) 1.

<sup>59</sup>*Is the Bible Worth Reading*, 31, 70, 204; *Boston Investigator* (26 Oct. 1901) 7.



But he made it clear right at the beginning of his address that creedal conformity was anathema to him. "The right to think," he said, "gives man the right to think differently from other men." But that was as far as he dared go in that direction, for the occasion called not for an attack on Christianity but an endorsement of the American ideals of liberty and patriotism, and these he believed in fervently. America was his church, he said, liberty his religion, and Paul Revere his prophet. "His whole heart, his whole being," he said of the famous silversmith "was enlisted in the struggle for freedom." If Washburn, did not believe in American churches, as a patriot, and certainly as a realtor, he believed in American homes and schools. "The pillars of our Republic are good homes and good schools," he told his audience. Throughout his speech, he showed himself more the booster than the apostate. "We live in the grandest commonwealth in the grandest country on this earth," he concluded. "To deserve a share of its glory we should contribute something to it. Let us take pride in our town and make it worthy of the great patriot for whom it is named and worthy of the glorious state and nation of which it is part."<sup>60</sup>

A dynamic public speaker and editor of the most important freethinking newspaper in the United States, Washburn had been referred to at an annual Thomas Paine commemoration in Boston as Ingersoll's leading disciple, as the "best-known representative of the illustrious Freethinker upon our Western continent."<sup>61</sup> After Ingersoll's death, in 1899, Washburn became in the opinion of some the leading freethinker in the United States. He tried to be, as Ingersoll had been, the embodiment of free-thinking manliness, a tower of strength to a beleaguered movement. In 1901, he gave the main address before the Congress of the American Secular Union, in Buffalo,<sup>62</sup> and served as its vice president that year.<sup>63</sup> But a personal tragedy occurred around this time that was to test his strength and resolve. He had already lost his first daughter, according to an earlier newspaper report, to diphtheria. Then his daughter from his second marriage, Mabel, who had tuberculosis, passed away on her nineteenth birthday, in February 1901. Her dying words reportedly were, "Papa! I am so tired. I want to

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<sup>60</sup>*Revere Journal* (14 Jan. 1899) 4.

<sup>61</sup>*Boston Investigator* (29 Feb. 1900) 6.

<sup>62</sup>"The Infamy of the Twentieth Century," an Address delivered before the American Secular Union, in Buffalo, N.Y., *Boston Investigator* (26 Oct. 1901) 4-7.

<sup>63</sup>Warren lists L. K. Washburn as being one of a group of popular Freethought writers, including Ingersoll and Voltaire (188). Presumably, the L. H. Washburn whom Warren mentioned in connection with the American Secular Union (175, 201) is the same L. K. Washburn.

sleep."<sup>64</sup> A loss like this may have hit nonbelievers like Washburn even harder than it would have believers, for he did not have the consolation that he might one day be reunited with her in heaven. Atheists had no such consolation, but they did not give up all the consolations of religion. Just as they had their freethinking hymn books, they also had their freethinking ministers. The Rev. J. B. Bland advertised his services in each issue of the *Boston Investigator*, saying he would "answer calls to officiate at marriages or funerals, or to give lectures or take part in debates." If Bland believed in God, he did so in a way that did not offend atheists, and Washburn recommended him to others. Bland was present at the private funeral services at the Washburn home on Tuckerman Street on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1901. No atheist eye was probably dry when Bland asked, "What, then, mourn we here to-day, my friends? A sweet, pure, bright young maiden, one of the very best of our good New England type, one who graciously and winsomely had unfolded as do our spring and summer flowers."<sup>65</sup> However devastated he may have been by the loss, Washburn carried on with his work in the following months. But he could not resist returning the next summer to the cottage where he and his daughter had hung laurel around the Ingersoll's likeness. "The picture is in its old place," Washburn wrote, "and the sight of it revives memories of another summer when a sweet little girl of thirteen played in the grove near the house and seemed a part of the beautiful scene."<sup>66</sup>

In Revere, the two decades following the dedication of the town hall was a period of intense struggle for political control of the town between the Protestants on the one side and the Catholics and Jews on the other. During those years, Washburn continued to live in Revere and carry on his real estate activities, but he also continued to wage his crusade against religion and in particular against Catholicism. In 1911, a year in which the reform spirit of the Progressive movement was cresting and the dark clouds of the First World War were not yet visible on the horizon, he published his only book — if we exclude *Cosmian Hymns*, published in 1888. *Is the Bible Worth Reading and Other Essays* is a collection of short essays interspersed with aphorisms that, taken together, express his atheist philosophy. "There is nothing in the

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<sup>64</sup>"In Memoriam," *Boston Investigator* (9 March 1901) 6. I heard from a librarian at the Boston Public Library that Mabel may have undergone a religious conversion during her illness. Allegations of freethinkers' deathbed conversions are not unusual. However, regarding the religious beliefs of Washburn's wife, who outlived her husband by more than ten years, it should be noted that the minister of the First Congregational Church, the Rev. E. Ambrose Jenkins, presided at her funeral. See her obituary in the *Revere Journal* (15 Jan. 1939) 3.

<sup>65</sup>*Boston Investigator* (9 March 1901) 6.

<sup>66</sup>"Editorials," *Boston Investigator* (3 Aug. 1901) 1.

universe but the universe; nothing in the universe that reveals a God." Washburn had gone far beyond the radicalism of Theodore Parker. Because he believed religion was a pernicious influence in human affairs, he did not think Christians could lead a truly ethical life, but an atheist, if he was a humanist, could. "Intellectual and moral uprightness is the distinguishing characteristic of modern infidelity," he wrote.<sup>67</sup> He claimed to be as devoted, in principle, to doing good and helping humanity as any Christian who practiced the Golden Rule. His philosophy might be called ethical atheism. While rejecting the supernatural basis on which all faiths rested, Washburn appears to have felt intensely all the moral and ethical imperatives of traditional religions. Though no longer a Unitarian, he appeared to possess to a striking degree that "all-pervasive evolutionary optimism" that Conrad Wright said most Unitarians shared as they faced the new century.<sup>68</sup> It was around the turn of the century that Washburn said, "The world seems nearer the full realization of human freedom and brotherhood than ever before."<sup>69</sup> For him, the most important human freedom remained the freedom from religion.

There were a few instances when Washburn sounded like a supporter of the Social Gospel movement, as when he said that man is crucified between two thieves – the one, the state, which robs him of his body; and the other, the church, which robs him of his soul. At other times, especially when he spoke about the plight of workers and servants, he sounded like a socialist. But there is no evidence of his involvement in the socialist movement, perhaps in part because the workers and servants he sympathized with in the abstract turned out to be too often in the flesh the same Catholics whom he had an almost physical aversion to. He was presumably expressing ethnic prejudice, not free-thought principles, when he said it would have been a blessing to the world if the Roman Catholic Church, instead of requiring its devotees to go to Mass, simply required them to take a bath. The secular humanist in him coexisted with the nativist.

Washburn was not a deep or original thinker; it is not likely he thought somebody who knew the truth had to be. He was a publicist for the cause of atheism, with a talent for the clever phrase and the caustic aphorism.<sup>70</sup> At his worst, he seems to have been a huckster for the

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<sup>67</sup>*Boston Investigator*, (3 Aug. 1901) 176.

<sup>68</sup>Wright, *A Stream of Light*, 94.

<sup>69</sup>*Is the Bible Worth Reading*, 89.

<sup>70</sup>"To be a Christian is to surrender to the priest or minister in the name of Christ. It is to be a monkey at the end of an ecclesiastic string to get pennies for his master." "The cross everywhere is a dagger in the heart of liberty." "Religion is after all only dead politics." *Is the Bible Worth Reading*, 86, 9, 40.

future; his selling point was that today is better than yesterday and tomorrow will be best of all. He looked to the future as the time when reason would triumph, and justice and truth would prevail. The most damning thing he could say about Jesus was that he was out-of-date. "He does not touch this age; its aspirations, its interests, its reforms, its work, its spirit," he said. "He is left behind, outgrown, and, consequently, whatever he did is of no value to this age."<sup>71</sup> For all his irreverence, there was a bourgeois cast to Washburn's mind that local businessmen would have found congenial. He believed the most important things in life were home, family, and career, none of which Christ had had. Jesus had never amounted to much. By American standards, Christ was a failure.<sup>72</sup>

Washburn believed Christ's espousal of poverty as the path to spiritual fulfillment was egregiously out of keeping with the needs of America in the twentieth century. He believed poverty was a curse everywhere and for everybody. "It is the one great giant evil of earth," he averred. "It is the hell of the twentieth century."<sup>73</sup> For Jesus to have praised poverty showed how mentally unbalanced the self-proclaimed savior was, and Jesus's view that the poor were blessed was just one of the messages from the Sermon on the Mount that Washburn considered irrational, and which prompted him to ask the question, in the title of one of his most provocative lectures, "Was Jesus Insane?" In a lecture, "The Egotism of Jesus," delivered in Boston, in March 1890, Washburn had called Jesus "the most audacious egotist" the world had ever known, and he added that Christ "stands in the way of mental advancement. He stands across the road of rational endeavor. He stands for a superstition."<sup>74</sup>

We do not know if Washburn's faith in reason, science, and the future survived the horrors of the First World War. His career as a freethinker, as well as a real estate agent, ended around 1920. (He made his last foreclosure in 1919.) He lived on in Revere until 1927, but his last years could not have provided any vindication for his belief that religion would wither away in America. The only religion that had withered away in Revere was Unitarianism. The more orthodox Protestant sects, if they did not flourish, persisted, and Catholicism, his *bête noire*, became the dominant religion in the city, with five different parishes. At the time of his death, and not far from his home on Tuckerman Street, the Italian Catholics were completing a large

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<sup>71</sup>*Is the Bible Worth Reading,* 186.

<sup>72</sup>"Nowhere to Lay His Head," *Boston Investigator* (1 Feb. 1902) 3.

<sup>73</sup>*Is the Bible Worth Reading,* 203.

<sup>74</sup>*Boston Investigator* (21 May 1890) 1-2.

cathedral-like church, St. Anthony's. Washburn's obituary in the *Revere Journal* consisted of just several lines.<sup>75</sup> It said he was once well known in the city, but it did not say for what. There was no mention of his atheism. He had already begun to be what he remains today, a non-person, a non-presence. If Paine is the atheist in the attic of American history, Washburn is the atheist in the attic of the history of Revere.

@Robert Forrey, 2003

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<sup>75</sup>Washburn died at his home on 19 Tuckerman Street, in Revere, on October 28th, 1927. According to official records, the cause of death was arteriosclerosis. His occupation was listed as retired minister. See *Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Division of Vital Statistics*, vol. 63, p. 385.