

## DID UU KNOW?

### Ambulatory Luminaries

Did you ever notice that the numerous rooms off the Ambulatory of our church are named after (you might have guessed) various Unitarian or Universalist luminaries? This is the fifth of several articles that will attempt to shine a light on who these Ambulatory Luminaries were and why they merit the honor of being named to these locations.

#### **Joseph Priestly, 1733-1805 (Room 5) by Toni Gold**

We leave Transylvania and Poland to go to England for our fourth Unitarian Luminary, Joseph Priestly. Priestly was reared in a Calvinist home in the wake of the turmoil of the Protestant Reformation and educated by dissenting ministers at Daventry Academy. However, he was refused admission to the Calvinist church because of his rejection of its teachings on predestination and original sin. Writing and publishing, Priestly steadily grew more radical in his views. In 1767 he accepted a call to serve the congregation at Leeds and became the leader of a revitalized Unitarianism in England. During this time, he formed a friendship with Benjamin Franklin.

But his career was interrupted by the French Revolution that was happening across the Channel. A supporter of the American Revolution a few years earlier, Priestly also supported the French Revolution, which frightened England; Priestly and the Unitarians were denounced as enemies of church and state. In 1791 a mob attacked and burned his church, laboratory, and library. He fled to London, and three years later sailed for America. While there, Priestley gave a series of sermons in Philadelphia leading to the founding of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia.

Priestley would spend the remaining years of his life in the new United States. He continued his educational projects, helping to establish the Northumberland Academy in Massachusetts, donating his library to the fledgling institution. He exchanged letters with Thomas Jefferson regarding the proper structure of a university, advice Jefferson used when founding the University of Virginia. Jefferson and Priestley became close, and when the latter had completed his General History of the Christian Church, he dedicated it to President Jefferson, writing that "It is now only that I can say I see nothing to fear from the hand of power, the government under which I live being for the first time truly favourable to me."

Despite his formidable theological career, the world best remembers Priestly as a scientist, although he himself thought of his science merely as a "theologian's pastime." He viewed his chief calling as a religious writer, thinker, and pastor; he began a study of chemistry as a diversion. Priestly was also a natural philosopher, separatist theologian, grammarian, multi-subject educator, and liberal political theorist who published over 150 works. His considerable scientific reputation rested on his invention of carbonated water, his writings on electricity, and his discovery of several "airs" (gases), the most significant being what Priestley dubbed "dephlogisticated air" (oxygen). Sadly, Priestley's determination to defend "phlogiston theory" and to reject what would become the chemical revolution eventually left him isolated within the scientific community.

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