

## **Watts and Briggs Families**

### **Leading Figures in the Early Days of the First Unitarian Church of Rochester**

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The First Unitarian Church of Rochester was established in 1829. The new congregation purchased a small building but was soon forced to sell it because of financial troubles. During most of the 1830s, the loosely organized congregation operated without a minister and met in rental spaces and members' homes.

Between 1840 and 1842, the congregation experienced a burst of energy, hired a minister, and constructed a new church building. First Unitarian's church histories credit this revitalization to a small group of people that included the Watts and Briggs families, the subjects of this document. In a sense, this document also involves two other families, the Delanos and the Kemptons, because two of the women who married into the Watts and Briggs families were Delanos and another two were Kemptons. All came from Massachusetts, the center of the emerging Unitarian movement. All had strong ties to the whaling centers of Nantucket and New Bedford, which were known as abolitionist strongholds and safe havens for those who had emancipated themselves from slavery. When Frederick Douglass, the future abolitionist leader, escaped from enslavement in 1838, he chose to settle first in New Bedford.

### **Family Backgrounds**

The eldest person in his story, Ebenezer Watts (1782-1873), married Nancy Delano (1786-1835) in 1806. He was from Nantucket, an island off the Massachusetts coast. She was from New Bedford, a port city on the mainland not far away. In 1815, they moved to the recently established village of Rochester, New York, where Ebenezer worked initially as a tinsmith and then opened the community's first hardware store. Widely respected, he became the village treasurer and a vestryman at St. Luke's Episcopal Church.<sup>1</sup> (A vestry is similar to a board of trustees.) They lived in what is now known as the Ebenezer Watts house, a local landmark and the oldest surviving residence in downtown Rochester. It is located at 47 South Fitzhugh Street at the northern entrance to the Civic Center garage.<sup>2</sup>



*Ebenezer Watts House, near Civic Center garage entrance on Fitzhugh St.*

Their son, James Howland Watts (1807-1857), married Martha Le Baron Delano (1818-1855) of North Charlestown, New Hampshire, in 1836.<sup>3</sup> Before retiring from the sea and becoming a farmer in North Charlestown, Martha's father, Abisha Delano, had been a ship captain who lived in New Bedford, the hometown of James's mother. He had been a member of New Bedford's Congregational Church, which later evolved into that city's Unitarian Church. When a large group of theologically conservative

members left that congregation in 1810 to form a separate church, Abisha served as one of the leaders of the remaining congregation, which favored a more liberal theology.<sup>4</sup> Martha's parents provided her with a better education than was received by most young females of her time by enrolling her in the Lawrence Academy, a co-educational boarding school in Groton, Massachusetts.<sup>5</sup> Groton's Unitarian Church was (and still is) adjacent to the school's campus.

Nancy Delano (who married Ebenezer Watts) and Martha Delano (who married his son James) were from different families in New Bedford, but they were nonetheless part of the large New England clan of Delanos who were prominent as mariners, whalers, and shipbuilders. They had deep roots in New England, the first Delano having landed at Plymouth Colony only a year after the Pilgrims arrived on the Mayflower.

When the Unitarians separated from the Congregational Church in the 1820s, many of the Delanos went with them, including many of those in the New Bedford area. Warren Delano, one of Nancy's cousins, was a prominent example. He lived in Fairhaven, a community adjacent to New Bedford, and raised funds to help build what evolved into Fairhaven's Unitarian Church.<sup>6</sup> He also influenced the creation of the Unitarian Church at Rock Tavern, New York.<sup>7</sup> His son, Warren Delano Jr, was a founder of what is now the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Essex County, New Jersey.<sup>8</sup> (These two Delanos were, incidentally, the grandfather and uncle of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt).<sup>9</sup>

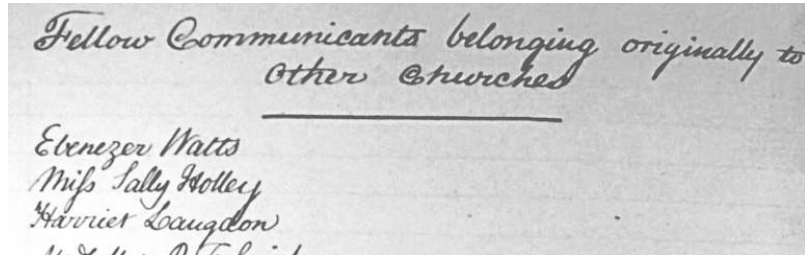
John Briggs (1788-1853) and Sophia F. Kempton (about 1797-1875), two other people from New Bedford who figure prominently in this story, married in 1827. Sophia is known to have been a member of the New Bedford Unitarian Church, and John seems to have been associated with it also. John and Sophia were married by William Ware, a prominent Unitarian minister in New York City who had New Bedford connections. The couple apparently had a strong personal tie to Ware: they traveled to Manhattan to be married there by him in his church rather than in their hometown. Ware happens to be the minister who brought Unitarianism to Rochester in 1828, a year after the Briggs's wedding, by preaching there for several Sundays and helping to establish the city's Unitarian church. After John Briggs retired as captain of a whaling ship around 1840, he and Sophia moved to Rochester (perhaps with Ware's encouragement?) during the crucial period when the young and struggling congregation was being revitalized.<sup>10</sup>

Nancy Delano Watts died in 1835. Two years later, a relationship between the Watts and Briggs families was created when Ebenezer Watts married Sophia Kempton Briggs' sister, Deborah (1791-1880), a widow from New Bedford, Nancy's hometown.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, Ebenezer was not unfriendly to liberal religion: his first wife came from a family that included religious liberals who helped to establish churches for the new Unitarian denomination, and his new wife came from the New Bedford Unitarian Church.

After relocating to Rochester, Deborah joined her new stepson, James Watt, in the Unitarian community there. She was the fifth member of this related group of people who helped revitalize Rochester's Unitarian congregation in the period around 1840. To summarize, with the four family names in bold to highlight their interrelationships, they were:

- Deborah **Kempton Watts** (the second wife of Ebenezer **Watts**),
- James **Watts** (son of Ebenezer and Nancy **Delano Watts**) and his wife Martha **Delano Watts**,
- John and Sophia **Kempton Briggs**.

In 1842, Ebenezer Watts gave at least \$100, a significant sum of money in those days, toward the construction of a new church building for the Unitarian congregation that was being revitalized by a group of people that included his wife, his son and his wife, and his wife's sister and her husband.<sup>12</sup> Ebenezer himself became at least a nominal member of First Unitarian while maintaining his membership in St. Luke's Episcopal Church, where he had been a member since its creation. First Unitarian's earliest record book lists his name at the top of page 4, which is labeled "Fellow Communicants belonging originally to other churches."<sup>13</sup> His main allegiance seems to have been with St. Luke's, however. The *Annals of St. Luke's Church, Rochester, N.Y. 1817-1883* lists him as a vestryman there from 1846 to 1848.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, in 1829, just after the Rochester Unitarians first organized into a congregation, they purchased St. Luke's original church building, a small structure that St. Luke's had outgrown. This is the building that was mentioned earlier, the one that the young Unitarian congregation had been forced to sell because of financial problems.



Rev. Newton Mann's 1881 history of First Unitarian reports that Deborah Kempton Watts and her sister Sophia Kempton Briggs were stalwart members of the church. While the congregation was still meeting in rented spaces, they took responsibility for bringing the Bible to morning and evening services, lighting the room for evening services, and furnishing additional chairs from their own homes when necessary.<sup>15</sup>

### Revitalization

Rochester's Unitarians operated with little formal structure during much of the 1830s, but they aspired to a proper church organization. In 1840, eight people, including James Watts, signed a document expressing a desire to be "stated hearers" (officially enrolled members) of the church. (Another of the eight "stated hearers," William W. Allcott, had a business tie with the Watts, having worked in the hardware and foundry business that Ebenezer had developed. Allcott's uncle had become a partner in the business, after which it was known as Allcott, Watts and Langworthy.<sup>16</sup>)

The congregation benefited greatly from the arrival of Myron Holley, who moved to Rochester in 1837. Like his brother Horace, the minister of a Unitarian Church in Boston, Myron was a committed Unitarian. He also was a national leader of the movement to abolish slavery and a founder of the abolitionist Liberty Party. Earlier, he had been a key figure in the construction of the Erie Canal, having served as the project's treasurer and the on-site supervisor of its construction contracts. An accomplished and well-known public speaker, he provided his services to First Unitarian, which was still without a minister. Holley attracted newcomers through his sermons, which he ably delivered even though he had no training as a minister and was not ordained. According to Rev. Mann's history of First Unitarian, he did more than anyone else to put the church on a firm footing. Tragically, Holley died in 1841 at the age of only 62, leaving the growing congregation without a leader.

After Holley died, James and Martha Delano Watts asked Rev. Storer of the Syracuse Unitarian Church to help with the challenging situation in Rochester. Generously agreeing to do so, Storer preached in Rochester for several Sundays and assisted with the creation of a formal church organization.

James Watts was one of two men chosen to preside over the congregational meeting in 1841 that established First Unitarian as a religious corporation. (None of the women in this story participated in this meeting because New York State law of that time specified that only men were allowed to incorporate religious organizations.<sup>17</sup>) These two men were also the two signers of the legal document known as the Certificate of Incorporation. John Briggs, now settled in Rochester after moving from New Bedford, was elected as one of five members of the church's Board of Trustees, which soon hired a minister and began the process of constructing a church building.

According to Rev. Mann's history, James and Martha Delano Watts hosted the first meeting of the reorganized congregation in their home. Subsequent meetings were held in a larger space in the courthouse until the church building could be constructed. Not long afterwards, James and Martha moved to a house that was next door to the church's new building on North Fitzhugh Street.<sup>18</sup> When that church building was destroyed by fire, it was replaced in 1865 by one constructed on the other side of Fitzhugh Street on a lot that had been purchased earlier by the Briggs family for their own use. At the minister's request, they agreed to convey the lot to First Unitarian for its new building.<sup>19</sup>

When she died, Deborah Kempton Watts (Ebenezer's wife) left \$2000 to the church in her will. According to Rev. Mann's history, that was a substantial portion of her estate.

Everyone in this story had already died when Rev. Mann published his history of First Unitarian in 1881, so their names did not appear in the list of church members included in his history. The list does, however, include "Mr. and Mrs. F. B. Watts" and their four children. That refers to Frederick Baccus Watts, the son of James and Martha Delano Watts, who lived for part of his childhood in the house mentioned above, the one that was next door to the church. One of their four children is listed in Mann's history with a name that honors both families in this story: "Miss Nancy Briggs Watts."

When John and Sophia Kempton Briggs died, they were transported back to New Bedford for burial. The Watts family is buried in Mount Hope Cemetery on Linden Avenue, Section C, Lot 8. The red marker at the far left on [this map](#) shows the location, which is not far from the main parking area and near the Susan B. Anthony gravesite.

### **Influx of Progressive Quakers**

By a fortunate coincidence, the people in this story were well positioned to assist First Unitarian during the next phase of its development. Not long after the reorganized congregation moved into its new building in 1842, it began to experience an influx of people from Quaker backgrounds, including the Anthony family and the now-famous Susan B. Anthony.

These newcomers were passionate opponents of slavery, which had created tension within their Quaker congregation. Their determination to join abolitionist organizations led many of their co-religionists to protest that Quakers should not mix with non-Quakers any more than necessary. Firmly committed to the abolition of slavery, these progressive Quakers left their congregation. Seeking a new church home,

some of them were drawn to First Unitarian, partly because they were already working with several of its members in the abolitionist movement. They were also strongly attracted to Unitarianism's support for freedom of thought and its avoidance of rigid religious doctrine.

One unusual aspect of First Unitarian's congregation must have made their transition into a new congregation even easier. Quakers dominated the whaling industry in Nantucket and New Bedford, the communities that the people in this story came from, people who therefore were familiar with Quaker ways. The New Bedford Quakers had experienced a bitter dispute in the early 1820s, with one side insisting on having at least the *option* of engaging with the new ideas of the modern world, and the other side insisting on more restrictive policies. Almost all the former group, known as New Light Quakers, left their congregation and joined the New Bedford Unitarian Church in numbers large enough to alter the nature of that congregation. Reflecting this new situation, when the New Bedford church raised funds in 1832 to construct a new building, a quarter of those who contributed were from this new group of Quaker Unitarians.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was invited to occupy the pulpit at the New Bedford church for several weeks during the winter of 1833-34. His philosophy of transcendentalist Unitarianism, which urged an awareness of the divine in nature and humanity, was unwelcome in many Unitarian churches of that time, but not in New Bedford. Histories of that church report that Emerson's message was warmly received there because of the large number of open-minded New Light Quakers in the congregation.<sup>20</sup> The New Bedford Unitarian Church, of course, is the one that the Kempton sisters, and most likely John Briggs also, had attended before moving to Rochester. James and Martha Delano Watts, both with close family connections in New Bedford, would also have been familiar with the story of this group of Quaker Unitarians.

A few years after the events at New Bedford's Unitarian Church, the Unitarian Church in Philadelphia experienced a similar influx of Quakers, one that also had a positive outcome. By yet another fortunate coincidence, Maria Porter, a key member of the Underground Railroad in Rochester and one of the people who led the revitalization of Rochester's Unitarian Church, had been a member of the Unitarian Church in Philadelphia before moving to Rochester.<sup>21</sup>

This unusual combination of circumstances meant that when progressive Quakers began to associate with Rochester's Unitarian church, several of its leading members had personal knowledge of an earlier time when Quakers had joined other Unitarian churches. We have no direct evidence that the Kempton sisters, John Briggs, Maria Porter, and James and Martha Delano Watts shared with other Rochester Unitarians the comforting stories of these earlier experiences, but it is difficult to imagine otherwise. The incoming Quakers' ardent opposition to slavery and their advocacy of women's rights undoubtedly generated friction with some of the more conservative members of the Unitarian congregation of that time, but the newcomers seem to have been quite happy with their new church home. The story of their impact on First Unitarian as well as on the broader society is told in another document, "The Quaker Unitarians of Rochester."

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> [“Retrofitting Rochester: Ebenezer Watts Home”](#), by Jeff Ludwig, Democrat and Chronicle, June 14, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia has an article about the [Ebenezer Watts House](#). The FindaGrave website is one source for information about [Ebenezer Watt's family tree](#).

<sup>3</sup> *The Genealogy, History, and Alliances of the American House of Delano, 1621 to 1899* (1899), by Joel Andrew Delano, pages [487](#) and [491](#). Their marriage was reported in the *Rochester Daily Democrat* on Nov. 5, 1836. To view it, go to [“Marriages and Deaths from Rochester Newspapers July 1, 1836 - Dec. 31, 1836”](#) and scroll down to Nov 5.

<sup>4</sup> *The First Congregational Society in New Bedford, Massachusetts* (1889) by William James Potter, Section II, “The Separation in Bedford Precinct,” [pages 119-130](#). Additional information about Martha Delano and her father Abisha can be found in [Sullivan County, New Hampshire, Genealogy and History](#) by searching for “Abisha Delano”.

<sup>5</sup> Martha L. B. Delano of Charlestown, NH, is listed as a student in *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Lawrence Academy* (1855), near the bottom of [page 81](#).

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Delano and Warren Delano were cousins, both descended from Thomas Delano and Jean Peckham, who married in 1727, according to a [family tree of Delanos on Geneanet](#). For information about Warren Delano, see the Fairhaven Office of Tourism’s articles on [The Delano Family](#) and the [Washington Street Meetinghouse](#).

<sup>7</sup> [UU Congregation at Rock Tavern - Our History](#).

<sup>8</sup> [Notable Early Members of the First Unitarian Church of Essex County](#).

<sup>9</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt's mother, Sara, the daughter of Warren Delano and the sister of Warren Delano Jr, was raised as a Unitarian. She married James Roosevelt, who was raised in the Dutch Reformed Church. After marriage, they became Episcopalians, as documented in, for example, *The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy: How America's Civil Religion Betrayed the National Interest* by Walter A. McDougall, Yale University Press (2018), [page 197](#).

<sup>10</sup> An article on the web named [John Briggs](#) by Doug Sinclair provides a helpful biographical sketch of Briggs. Basic genealogical information about John and Sophia Kempton Briggs can be found on [page 66](#) of a *John Briggs of Sandwich, Massachusetts and his descendants*, compiled by Edna Anne Hannibal (1962).

<sup>11</sup> Joel Andrew Delano's genealogy of the Delano family, cited earlier, says of Ebenezer Watts on [page 485](#) that, “He m 2d Deborah C (Kempton) (wid Churchill)”. Translated to less cryptic language, it says that Ebenezer’s second wife was Deborah, middle initial C, birth family name Kempton, widow of Churchill. Also see *Vital records of New Bedford, Massachusetts to the year 1850*, [page 579](#). The biographical sketch of John Briggs that was cited earlier likewise referred to, “Sophia's sister Deborah and husband Ebenezer Watts.”

<sup>12</sup> *Memoir of Rufus Ellis, Including Selections from His Journal and Letters* (1881), edited by Arthur Blake Ellis, [page 42](#). Rufus Ellis was the minister of First Unitarian while its new building was being constructed. As this source indicates, in a letter to his brother Ellis said, “Since you were with us, we have gone on bravely with our preparations for building. We have subscriptions already to the amount of \$1325 and have the best reasons to expect much more than this. Eben. Watts, the Episcopalian, has put down \$100 and expects to give more if we go along well.”

<sup>13</sup> The name immediately below Ebenezer’s, “Miss Sally Holley,” refers to the daughter of Myron Holley, who is discussed further below in this document. She came from the First Unitarian Church of Buffalo.

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<sup>14</sup> *Annals of St. Luke's Church, Rochester, N.Y. 1817-1883* by Rev. Henry Anstice, 1917, [pages 14-15](#) and [page 78](#).

<sup>15</sup> *First Unitarian Congregational Society of Rochester N. Y., A Sketch of its History* (1881) by Rev. Newton Mann.

<sup>16</sup> For more about William W. Allcott, see the [introductory image](#) and [page 24](#) of *Family of Asa Allcott* by Charles Allcott Flagg (1899).

<sup>17</sup> *An Act to Provide for the Incorporation of Religious Societies* (1813), New York State, Section Three. An extract of this law, which begins with, "It shall be lawful for the male persons of full age ...", appears in an article called "[Legal Insights into the Organization of the Church in 1830](#)" by David K. Stott in *BYU Studies*, Volume 49, Issue 2.

<sup>18</sup> The [obituary of Frederick Bacchus Watts](#), their son, in the *Rochester Herald*, August 11, 1913, says, "Later the family moved to North Fitzhugh street and occupied the house which has since given place to the Brick Church Institute." That was almost certainly the Pancost house, which was adjacent to the Unitarian Church. The lot that First Unitarian occupied then is now the parking lot for the Downtown United Presbyterian Church (DUPC), which was familiarly known in those days as "the Brick Church." That parking lot is adjacent to an annex to DUPC's main building, an annex that was once known as the Brick Church Institute and today is called the Institute Building.

<sup>19</sup> Rev. Frederick Holland's cover letter for his "Reminiscences of Rochester" says, "The Briggs had intended to build where this church stands but they very kindly gave up that lot at my urging." This six-page manuscript was written about 1873 and is now located in the Rare Books and Special Collections Department of the University of Rochester Library, "Unitarian Church, Rochester, New York papers," Series 1, Box 1, Item 23. A copy is in First Unitarian's digital archive.

<sup>20</sup> For an overview of the Quaker Unitarians of New Bedford and Philadelphia, see Charlotte Gaw, "Prodigal Sons and Daughters: Unitarianism in Philadelphia, 1796-1846", 2012, Institutional Scholarship, TriCollege Libraries Institutional Repository (a repository of materials important to Bryn Mawr, Haverford and Swarthmore Colleges), [pp. 60-65](#). For more detailed account of the dispute in New Bedford, see "The New-Light Quakers of Lynn and New Bedford" by Frederick B. Tolles in *The New England Quarterly*, September 1959, Vol. 32. No. 3, pages 291-319.

<sup>21</sup> See the footnote on [page 80](#) of *A Life for Liberty: Anti-slavery and Other Letters of Sallie Holley*, edited by John White Chadwick (1899).