

ESSEX HALL

Benjamin Franklin and Joseph Priestley were among those attending the first openly Unitarian worship service ever held in England, April 17, 1774. Six months earlier, the Rev. Theophilus Lindsey had resigned from the Anglican priesthood and moved with his family to London. His mind was fixed on a radical new experiment, to form an avowedly Unitarian congregation free from any compromise. Unitarian currents had long been running through the English intellect, but the doctrine was, after all, a heresy and strictly illegal. To Lindsey, now was the time for Unitarians to come out of the shadows and openly proclaim their faith.

Lindsey and his friends searched through London in the winter of 1773-74 for a suitable hall to serve as a chapel. In time they stood in front of an awkward and nondescript building on Essex Street, just off the Strand, and leading toward the Thames only a five-minute walk away. It bore the proud name of "Essex House", for it stood on the site of the residence of the Earl of Essex, executed by Queen Elizabeth two centuries before. Lindsey was ushered into a large and simple hall that could seat 300. Mr. Paterson, a book auctioneer, had just vacated the premises, and a lease could be had. Lindsey had found his chapel.

The Justices hesitated to grant permission for a Dissenting chapel, asking awkward questions about the beliefs to be preached. Legal minds among Lindsey's friends parried every probe of the Justices, and the registration was accomplished. Now the hall could be readied for worship services, for which well-wishers had contributed barely adequate funds. The Lindseys sold their silver to pay for their lodgings.

Finally the day for the first worship service arrived. No public notice was given for fear of opposition, but the word spread among the Dissenters of London. Even the neighborhood was buzzing with the report of a lady's maid that "a gentleman was going to open a room and preach a new religion." On the appointed Sunday, two hundred souls filled the former auction room.

Lindsey preached that first sermon on "The Unity of the Spirit and the Bond of Peace." He was pleased, as he reported, to see "a much larger and more respectable audience than I could have expected." Organized Unitarianism in Britain was now launched. Later the premises were expanded to become Essex Hall, the headquarters of British Unitarianism. Lindsey's hall was destroyed by German bombs in the Second World War, but today a modern Unitarian headquarters building, still called Essex Hall, occupies the spot.

Ref.: Earle Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: In Transylvania, England, and America* (1945), pp. 280-286; Mortimer Rowe, *The Story of Essex Hall* (1959), pp. 11-21