

A REPRIEVE JUST IN TIME

One of the founders of Universalism in America was Dr. George De Benneville (1703-1793) as a teenager had come to Universalism out of witnessing the compassion of “heathen” Moslems. His long service to Universalism almost was not to be. Being a French Huguenot in exile in England, he knew the French language and decided to return to France to preach his newfound religion of universal love to a people he felt were kept in ignorance by a repressive orthodox regime that banned liberality in religion.

Being a headstrong 19 year old full of the hope of Universalism, De Benneville crossed the English Channel, preached Universalism to whomever would listen in the marketplace of Calais, and was arrested. Imprisoned for eight days, he was told that if he were caught preaching heresy ever again, his life would be in danger. Undaunted, De Benneville went to Normandy, where his ancestors had lived, and gathered a sizeable assembly of converts to Universalism. Even some clergymen associated with him, and the new doctrine was advanced in clandestine meetings in the valleys and woods of Normandy. At length, in 1722, the civil authorities got wind of the fact that these illegal and dangerous ideas were still being preached.

The authorities made arrests. Several new Universalists were hanged. Others were whipped and branded with a hot iron. Some were sent to the galleys. They finally caught De Benneville and a colleague, Georges Durant. After a month in prison, both were condemned to die. They were taken together to the place of execution in Dieppe. Durant, a commoner, was to die by hanging. He ascended the ladder, and, singing a psalm, died proclaiming a religion in which all people are trusted with freedom.

Next came the turn of De Benneville. Excitement rose in the crowd of onlookers, for De Benneville was of noble parentage and had the privilege of dying by the axe. He refused to be blindfolded, and as he knelt at the block asked God to forgive his executioners. As the executioner was tying his hands behind his back, a horseman dashed through the crowd. He brought a reprieve from King Louis XV. The messenger arrived too late for Durant, but De Benneville was removed from the block, taken to prison in Paris, and eventually released through the intercession of Queen Marie. Throughout his confinement and ordeal, De Benneville discovered, “the grace of our God never leaves those who trust in him and are faithful until death.”

George De Benneville, yet only 19, now had a full life ahead of him, a life devoted to the service of the Universalist message. He preached Universalism for many years in Germany and Holland, and eventually came to America. In this new homeland he preached Universalism far and wide, while also practicing medicine, thus tending to the healing of both bodies and souls. He finally settled into a fine stone house in Pennsylvania that still stands.

Ref: “The Life and Trance of Doctor George De Benneville,” *The Annual Journal of the Universalist Historical Society*, vol. 2 (1960-61), pp. 78-80.

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