

A MEMORIAL TO UNLIMITED RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

In Britain, with its Established Anglican Church, Unitarian and other Dissenting churches were not given legal status and security until Parliament passed the “Dissenters’ Chapels Act” in 1844. Unitarians rejoiced, and formed a committee that resolved “that, viewing this measure as the first legislative recognition of the great truth, that the sanctity of private judgment in matters of religion may be a principle in men’s minds paramount to the holding of any peculiar dogma, we would venture to suggest the formulation of some permanent memorial, educational or otherwise, to perpetuate in the most useful form the great principle of unlimited religious liberty. ”

A committee was formed, and two years later reported its recommendation “that a building be erected or obtained for the residence and accommodation of young men attending University College, London, including suitable rooms for Lectures, a Library, and a Residence for a Principal or Superintendent.” Religious instruction was to be made available, as to be “of that impartial character which is calculated to promote and stimulate religious inquiry and the exercise of private judgment.” The committee also recommended that Unitarian students at the University “should associate during their University career with Students of religious opinions differing from their own.” The institution would “constitute a most honourable and permanent memorial of the great principle of unlimited religious liberty.”

The plan was adopted, and in October 1849 was opened “University Hall” on Gordon Square in London. In these spacious rooms James Martineau, the most prominent Unitarian minister of the nineteenth century, would lecture for the next thirty years. A direct access led to University College.

A century later, when a German V-1 “buzz bomb” destroyed the Unitarian headquarters on Essex Street, it was fitting that University Hall opened its doors to accommodate denominational offices until a new headquarters building could be built.

Ref: James Drummond and C. B. Upton, *The Life and Letters of James Martineau* (London: Nisbet, 1902), vol. 1, pp. 244-246, 263; Mortimer Rowe, *The Story of Essex Hall* (London: Lindsey, 1959), p. 53.

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