First Unitarian Universalist Church

2903 Jefferson Avenue

The First Unitarian Universalist Church traces its origin to the First Presbyterian Church, now by coincidence also located at the corner of Jefferson and South Claiborne avenues.

Founded in 1818, The First Presbyterian Church was riven in the 1830s by a schism that led some members to declare themselves, first, Congregational and then Unitarian. They continued to occupy the original Presbyterian church, known informally as The Strangers Church, leaving the Presbyterians to establish a new church. The Unitarians church, at Gravier Street and St. Charles Avenue, succumbed to fire in 1851 and was replaced by the octagonal Church of the Messiah, on St. Charles Avenue near Julia Street. A description of this building in the Summer 2020 issue of *Preservation in Print* mentioned that it had colorful stained-glass windows accentuated by vaulted ceilings.

In 1902 the congregation, like many others, moved uptown, building a Gothic-style church at the corner of Danneel Street (then South Rampart Street) and Jefferson Avenue (then Peters Avenue). The architect was Robert Spencer Soulé. When termites seriously compromised the Gothic church, a modern replacement by Albert C Ledner in the style of Frank Lloyd Wright was erected on the same site in 1958. This building still stands and has been renovated into a lovely home.

Given the ongoing challenges of maintaining the modern structure, the congregation moved to its current home in 1994. This church, designed by Carl L. Olschner for the First Evangelical and Reformed Church, is of brick in Gothic style with a bell tower, arched windows, and a rose window. The main building was dedicated in 1951, and the education wing was completed soon after. Probably installed during the construction of the church, the present nave windows reflect window styles in the 1950s, with unadorned religious symbols on pale art glass.

In the 1930s, while the Unitarians occupied the Gothic church on Jefferson Avenue, the stunning Gordon Window was donated as a memorial to Jean and Kate Gordon by their sister.

The Gordon sisters were lifelong Unitarians and New Orleans activists who were effective in bringing the Sewerage and Water Board to fruition, opening a hospital for tuberculosis victims, founding the SPCA, maintaining the Milne Home for Destitute Orphan Girls, fighting for voting rights for white women, and campaigning against the evils of Storyville.

The Gordon Window was created by the Willet Studio of Philadelphia, one of the largest stained glass studios in the U.S. It produced windows for West Point and the Graduate School at Princeton. As far as we know, St. Georges Church and Christ Church Cathedral are the only other New Orleans churches with Willet windows. In the Gordon Window, artist George Guret followed the 19th-century pictorial style favored by William Willet, the studios founder, even though he had died and his son Henry ran the business.

The Gordon Window, which was still in storage when Hurricane Katrina struck, emerged from the flood encased in mud, its wooden frame weakened by termites and its leaded structure bent and broken. With help from its dedicated members, professional glass restorers, and volunteers from all over the country, the window and the church have been largely restored. The window is now back-lit above the altar, and smaller companion windows are installed in the narthex.

The window is possibly unique in New Orleans religious glass for its incorporation of symbols of the zodiac. The framing incorporates wood from the flooded pews.

Following Hurricane Katrina, Janet Kerry and Richard Smith, from the Arlington, Virginia, Unitarian Church, created a glass triptych called *The Water Rising,* symbolizing the church and its faith before, during, and after the storm. The artists of this powerful historyand affirmation of the churchhad, volunteered with the clean-up efforts and were inspired by the work of the congregation. The first window includes the Unitarian Universalist logo of a flaming chalice and the fleur-de-lis. The second panel portrays the flooding and devastation, and the third honors the rebuilding, with the chalice lighted again and the fleur de lis again visible. The gold glass comes from windows in the church before the storm.

*Toured March 7, 2010*

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