

The congregation seemed open to a variety of expressions of faith and to accepting women in leadership roles. William Ellery Channing, a noted Unitarian who lived close by, loved to talk with the church members on Sunday afternoons. Julia Ward Howe, another neighbor up on Union Street, would come to “supply the pulpit.” A Sister Rev. Ellen Gustin of Attleboro was active in evangelization at the church working with the pastor. In the 1870s the pastor held open meetings at the Glen and local Methodist pastors and ministers from many denominations were present.



The structure of the church revolved around a board which was charged with finding and overseeing pastors and the life of the church. The officers were

three Elders, two Deacons, treasurer and the clerk. Most of what we know about the church is from the writings of the various clerks in the church records. The presiding Elder led the executive board meetings and annual meeting and lead prayers when there was no pastor.

The activities of the church centered around the official church committees.

1. Sunday School and Religious Culture;
2. Care of the Sick and Benevolent Work;
3. Library and Intellectual Culture (general knowledge, lectures, discussions, essays);
4. Music and Social Life;
5. Financial (collected the dues).

The most active of the committees seemed to be Music and Social Life. The church members believed that everyone should have access to a musical education. The church had a singing school and organ lessons were given. The social life group coordinated turkey suppers and Christmas festivals at the church. Oyster suppers, clambakes and strawberry festivals were held at the Glen. Even when there was no pastor and the spiritual side of the congregation was lacking, the social and benevolent parts of the church were active in uniting the group. A temperance group, the Good Templars, rented the church for meetings.

The church was an active, thriving congregation for the half century between the Civil War and World War I. It then went through a decline from which it never recovered. The last church service was held in the summer of 1937. After being declared a defunct organization in 1940 by a decree

of the Rhode Island Superior Court, the fourteen remaining members voted to give the property to the Portsmouth Historical Society. The church members recognized the church as a historic landmark in Portsmouth and they wanted the building to be used for educational or historical purposes.

The Portsmouth Historical Society has worked to preserve the Christian Union Church (1865) as its headquarters and museum by using grants from the Champlin Foundations. The outside of the building and the upstairs are church are completed. In addition to the church, the grounds house two other historic Portsmouth buildings. The Southermost School (1725) was moved to the Portsmouth Historical Society site in 1952. It has been entered on the National Register of Historic Places. The Old Town Hall (c. 1850) was moved to the Portsmouth Historical Society site in 1975. In this building you can view the horse drawn hearse (1871) of the Union Church



The Christian Union Church of Portsmouth Rhode Island

The church was founded in 1810 and became Portsmouth's third ecclesiastical society. Members met in private homes until a small meetinghouse was built in 1824 on the site of the present building. The present structure was built in 1865 at a cost of \$7,000. We know it as the "Union Church", but the official title was the Christian Church of Portsmouth. As it was incorporated Aug 31, 1861 the basic principle was that the Bible is the word of God. The church was not part of a denomination, but members were sent as delegates to the Rhode Island and Massachusetts Christian and Congregational conferences.