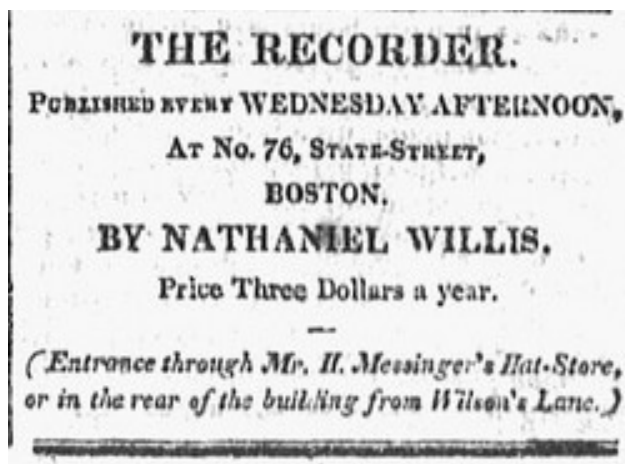


LEGACY IN PRINT

HOW CONGREGATIONALISM SHAPED AMERICAN JOURNALISM

KAREN ALEXANDER HOFFMAN

My father, the late Rev. Dr. John H. Alexander, was a champion of preserving the free Christian fellowship of true Congregationalism and, in 1957, was a founder of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. His belief in the need for an open-minded search for truth in historical as well as current social, political, and religious affairs inspired me to earn a university degree in history and to pursue a career first in journalism and then in political communications. So, as we celebrate 250 years of American liberty, it's not surprising that I decided to research the history of the influence of Congregational thought and theology in 19th and 20th century American journalism. We know the influence of the Mayflower Compact on the Founding Fathers' creation of a new form of free representative government, and that many founders were members of Congregational churches. But the history of Congregational publications is less familiar. A search through available internet sources (listed below) revealed it to be more complicated and much older than you might have imagined. In fact, the first religious newspaper in the newly created United States, the weekly *Boston Recorder*, was published on January 3, 1816, by - you guessed it - Congregationalists!



It's impossible for one article to do justice to 210 years of publications influenced by Congregationalism. Scores of religious periodicals at some point contributed through mergers to what today is *The Congregationalist*. And, I was unprepared for how far-flung and diverse the content of these publications was — everything from proceedings of local and regional Bible, missionary, and moral societies and international missionary work; to printing texts of legislation pending before Congress; to reviews of political arguments on public controversies; to stories on current events worldwide.

At the root were the Congregational beliefs in faith, freedom, and fellowship based on God's sovereignty over human affairs, decentralized power of free churches, limited civil government roles, and reliance on voluntary

associations, families, and individual churches to address social problems. Religious poetry was a mainstay, and later, some publications had a more literary bent with short stories exemplifying religious values. Almost from the beginning, there was mention of a movement to unify Christian churches.

That is way too much material for one article. Hopefully, this is just the first of a series. But here's a brief introduction to two prominent progenitors of *The Congregationalist*.

The first formally titled *Congregationalist* was published in Boston in 1849 and blended creative writing with journalistic reporting. It provided religious news, including accounts of and news from Congregational churches and state associations from throughout America. Contents included religious poetry and short stories, profiles of pastors and laymen, and important national and world news. The Civil War and the subsequent social upheaval caused by the industrial revolution and rapid urbanization gave rise to the Social Gospel movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Congregational ministers Washington Gladden and Lyman Abbott were prominent leaders of that movement who emphasized that the biblical call for the Kingdom of God mandated social as well as individual salvation, and thus Christians should work to eliminate poverty, child labor, poor working and housing conditions, and racial injustice.

A merger in 1930 resulted in *The Congregationalist and Herald of Gospel Liberty*, foreshadowing the movement to unify all Christian denominations into one centrally governed theological body. That philosophy was (and is) in direct opposition to the historic Congregational Way of free Christian fellowship among individual churches, each church free to organize under its own polity, and each church member free to believe in, worship, and serve God in their own way. Faith. Freedom. Fellowship.

It seems that Congregational publications ceased between 1934 and 1957, as I was unable to find anything in available internet sources. Perhaps it was because that period was marked by turmoil caused by the growing divisive debate between continuing Congregationalism and the denominational unification movement represented by the proposed merger of Congregational and Evangelical & Reformed churches. The merger establishing the United Church of Christ and the formation of the NACCC in 1957 resulted in *The Congregationalist* we know today. Volume 1, Number 1, was published in February 1958.

So, we've scratched the surface. Future articles will delve more deeply into the contents of the newspapers and periodicals mentioned above, Congregationalism and the Social Gospel movement, as well as a history of the Unification movement and its detrimental effect on the historic Congregational Way.

Sources: archive.org, catalog.haititrust.org, congregationalibrary.org, loc.gov (Library of Congress), naccc.org, wisconsinhistory.org