

Eliza Tupper Wilkes

The career of Reverend Eliza Tupper Wilkes is well summarized in Rebecca Hunt's [entry](#) in the online *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*:

Eliza Tupper Wilkes (October 8, 1844-February 5, 1917) was a circuit-riding preacher who started eleven Universalist and Unitarian churches in the American West. Among the first women ordained into the ministry, Wilkes worked with and mentored other liberal women ministers in the West. Known as the "Iowa Sisterhood," these women found opportunity and support in the Women's Western Unitarian Conference and from the leading western Unitarian minister, [Jenkin Lloyd Jones](#), at a time when women ministers were derided by most of the established clergy and spurned by the older congregations "back east."



The whole article is matter-of-fact and restrained. The author would have been justified in declaring that Wilkes was a prodigy of energy and productivity. With a supportive husband, she combined ministry with marriage and motherhood, bearing and raising six children. Though she was at times required to withdraw from full-time ministry and to make accommodations to her own and her eldest son's heart disease, her career was anything but the "mommy track." Besides ministering to and founding churches, she helped found Colorado College, supported education in other ways, and took a prominent international role in the women's suffrage movement.

The remainder of this entry is slightly condensed from Rebecca Hunt's piece. The list of sources is unabridged.

Wilkes was born in Maine, but was taken in early childhood to Iowa with her father, a Baptist missionary to the Native Americans, and her mother, a writer-editor who specialized in beekeeping and taught the subject at Iowa State College. She received fairly extensive education intended to prepare her for Baptist missionary work, but her beliefs changed and the influence of Quaker friends led her to become a Universalist while teaching in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. [Augusta Chapin](#) and [Mary Livermore](#) encouraged her to become a minister. She served churches in Menasha and then Neenah in Wisconsin. In Neenah she married William Wilkes, a law clerk, in 1869. From 1870 to 1873 she served the Universalist congregation in Rochester, Minnesota, where she was ordained.



An early home of First Universalist Church in Rochester, Minnesota. Founded in 1866.

The couple moved to Colorado Springs in 1873. William practiced law while Eliza briefly filled a New England pulpit. She traveled to Massachusetts in 1875 for the first Women's Ministerial Conference, where she impressed [Julia Ward Howe](#), the organizer, with her potential as a minister. During the Wilkeses' five years in Colorado Springs, Eliza gave birth to their first three children. She spent less time on ministry in these years but took on community activities, including organizing a new Unitarian congregation. She and her friend and parishioner, writer



Riding habit, later 19th century

Helen Hunt Jackson, often spent days riding and rambling to the top of nearby Cheyenne Mountain. Wilkes helped start Colorado College (Congregationalist), and led its first auxiliary board. She was also active in women's suffrage while in Colorado. During the 1876 state constitutional convention, she failed to have women's suffrage included in the document, and a suffrage referendum the following year also failed. Yet, at the convention, it was she who gave the invocation, the first woman ever to take that role.

When Eliza and her eldest son began having heart problems, the family left Colorado for Sioux Falls in what became South Dakota. William started a law firm and also served as a Minnehaha County Judge. Though too busy with young children for ministry, Eliza took on community projects like starting a library society and a women's club and hosting lecturers on suffrage and temperance. In 1884 she served as Honorary Vice President from South Dakota to the National Women's Suffrage Association. She also served as the director of the Iowa Unitarian Conference and secretary of the Post Office Missions of St. Paul, Minnesota.

From her base in Sioux Falls, Wilkes organized Universalist and Unitarian churches in South Dakota, Iowa, and Minnesota. The first, All Souls Universalist Church in Sioux Falls, first met in 1886. (Like the church in Rochester, MN, it is still active). The next year the congregation called [Caroline Bartlett](#) (later Crane) as their minister and built a new church two years later. Eliza Wilkes's circuit riding planted Unitarian congregations in Miner, Madison, and Huron in South Dakota; in Luverne and Adrian in Minnesota; and in Rock Rapids, Iowa. Many Sundays she preached in Rock Rapids in the morning and then rode fifteen miles to Luverne for an afternoon service.

Eliza's parents moved to nearby Beloit, Iowa. Her sister Mila, who was twenty years younger, often assisted with church business. At least three sisters, Mila Frances Tupper (later Maynard), Kate Tupper (later Galpin), and Margaret Tupper (later True) followed in Eliza's footsteps, working in the fields of education, welfare, temperance, liberal religion, and women's suffrage.

By the early 1890s, her heart problems led Wilkes to spend winter months in California. During the winter of 1890-91 she served the Alameda Unitarian Church. Wilkes was one of eighteen ordained women on the stage for the 1893 World's Congress of Representative Women held in Chicago, Illinois. Back in California in 1894, she served as Assistant Pastor at Oakland's First Unitarian Church. In 1895, Wilkes became the first woman minister to be a delegate to the Pacific Unitarian Conference. She was also elected President of the Western Woman's Unitarian Conference.



Between 1895 and 1901 Wilkes made yearly trips to Sioux Falls to check on her congregations. In 1901, she moved to Santa Ana, California, and once again helped to found a new congregation. William joined her a couple of years later. In 1905, at the national suffrage convention in Portland, Oregon, she shared the pulpit with [Eleanor Elizabeth Gordon](#) and Anna Howard Shaw. Wilkes was also active in the Woman's Congress Association of the Pacific Coast and the California Equal Suffrage Association. In 1911 she took part in the successful women's suffrage campaign in California. In 1913, at the Governor's request, she represented California at the International

Women Suffrage Congress in Budapest. She twice traveled to England to assist with suffrage campaigns.

William died in 1909. Eliza formally retired from the ministry that year but served as Chaplain for the Cumnock School in Los Angeles until her death in 1917. Her sister, Kate Tupper Galpin, was head of the Cumnock School Academy. In 1917 Eliza visited her daughter Queenie in Northampton, Massachusetts. She died while on a short holiday in Atlantic City, New Jersey. She was buried without a marker in the family plot at Mt. Pleasant Cemetery in Sioux Falls.

Sources

The Allen Tupper True Collection in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art contains letters, photographs, and memorabilia from the Tupper and Wilkes families. Other letters and records can be found in [Jenkin Lloyd Jones](#) Papers, Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago; Jenkin Lloyd Jones and Western Unitarian Conference Papers, Wiggins Library at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, Illinois; and the American Unitarian Association Archives at Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Biographical sources include a 16-page booklet, Mila Tupper Maynard, *A Mother's Ministry: Glimpses into the Life of Eliza Tupper Wilkes, 1844-1917* (1917?); Dana Bailey, *History of Minnehaha County* (1899); and the conference presentation, Doug Chapman, *Dakota Territory's Eliza Tupper Wilkes: Prairie Pastor* (2000), which is available on the Internet. A number of short items by and about Eliza Tupper Wilkes and her family can be found in 19th century suffrage and religious periodicals and reports including: *Old and New*, the Iowa Unitarian Conference monthly; the *Woman's Standard*, a national suffrage publication; *Progress*, the official organ of the National American Women Suffrage Association; *Unity*, published by the Western Unitarian Association; and *The Christian Register*. Secondary sources include Cynthia Grant Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers on the Frontier, 1880-1930* (1990); Charles H. Lyttle, *Freedom Moves West: A History of the Western Unitarian Conference 1852-1952* (1952); and Ronald Knapp, ed., *Bring, O Past, Your Honor: Unitarian Universalism and the Area That Is Now Prairie Star District* (1986).