

Welcoming Everyone

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Jan Matzeliger was born in 1852 in Dutch Guiana (now Suriname). For the geographically challenged among us, Suriname is a small country on the northeast coast of South America. Jan's father was an engineer of Dutch descent. His mother was a slave of African heritage. His parents never married. When Jan was two years old, he and his mother were freed from slavery. He was then raised by his father's family.

Jan was bright, curious and adventuresome. At age 10, he was an apprentice in a machine shop for his father's company. When he was 19, he left home to sail the world on the crew of a merchant ship. Two years later, the ship docked in Philadelphia and Jan decided to settle there. He had trouble finding work—after all, he was a person of color, an immigrant, who spoke Dutch. Eventually, he found a job with a shoemaker. He was so interested in shoemaking, he decided to move to the shoe manufacturing capital of the world—Lynn, Massachusetts.

Lynn had been at the center of the abolition movement. It was the home of Frederick Douglass. The large Quaker population was very influential. And our forebears were active in the cause. The first national convention of the Universalist Antislavery Society was held in Lynn in 1841. And Lynn Unitarian minister Charles Shackford was widely recognized for his work in the abolition movement.

Jan Matzeliger arrived in Lynn just over a decade after the Civil War. He found a flourishing, prosperous city which produced more than half of the country's shoes. Matzeliger eventually found work in a shoe factory. As a Black man, he was probably a janitor rather than a shoemaker. Because the pay was so poor, he also swept floors and cleaned tables in a local restaurant in exchange for meals. In his spare time, Jan worked on inventions. He didn't have enough money to apply for patents, so other people took advantage of his work.

Jan was a religious person. He was probably raised as a Catholic in his White family in Dutch Guiana. He always wore a pin that said, "Safe with Jesus." But in Lynn Jan found he wasn't always safe with Jesus' followers. Trying to find a religious home, Jan visited a Catholic church in West Lynn. But the Priest told him, "We want no niggers here."

Shoe manufacturing was becoming mechanized. But there was one step that always required hand work. The last step in shoemaking, attaching the sole to the rest of the shoe, required special skill and brought the best pay.

Matzeliger took up a challenge everyone else thought was impossible. He set out to invent a machine that would do the work of the skilled hand lasters.

Meanwhile, Jan also continued to search for a religious community. He was rejected by two other White congregations. Finally, a church in Lynn welcomed him to a social group, and allowed him to teach Sunday School. He found friends and a spiritual home.

Jan was also successful at developing a shoe lasting machine. With the help of two investors, he patented his machine in 1883, and demonstrated the first working model two years later. By the early 1900s, 95% of all shoe factories would use his machine. His invention was the foundation of the United Shoe Manufacturing Company of Beverly. His work made shoes affordable to the common people, and improved pay and working conditions for Lynn shoemakers. Except the hand lasters. Ironically, this Black immigrant ended the careers of many skilled White craftspeople.

Unfortunately, Jan never saw much benefit from his work. He died in 1889, at age 36. His Will was written a few months before his death. He left one-third of the stock in his company to the church that welcomed him—the North Congregational Church. He also remembered the three churches where he was rejected. In his Will, Matzeliger established a trust “to be used . . . toward the support of those Christian poor of said Lynn, irrespective of religious denomination or societies, *except that it shall not knowingly be given or expended for any member of the Roman Catholic, Unitarian or Episcopal Churches.*”

We made a mistake. We could have had more money for our endowment. That would be especially helpful this year. We could have had the chance to claim a famous UU who came from our church. But far more important, we missed an opportunity to welcome a person who was seeking a spiritual home.

I don't know why the Lynn Unitarians shunned young Jan Matzeliger. One person who studied Matzeliger, says, “Although a large percentage of Lynn's population

was active in the abolitionist movement it appears that some residents were not very accepting of black people, especially when they endeavored to join their churches.”¹ In other words, people said there was nothing wrong with Blacks, they just didn’t want to mingle with them.

This is an interesting—and not very comforting—lesson in our church’s history. But what does it have to do with us here today?

This year our church is faced with another opportunity. We’re in a process called “Welcoming Congregation”. It’s a program of the UUA for a congregation to look at itself, and to declare we welcome lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people. Of course, we think we welcome everybody. And I believe we do very well at that. We have many gay and lesbian people in our congregation. In fact, we’ve had a student minister and youth advisor, an interim minister of religious education, and a president—not to mention committee chairs and other active members. Why do we need to do more?

This is my answer. We must, as a religious community, declare that there is nothing wrong with gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people. Everyone is born with a sexual orientation. Some of us may believe the explanation is scientific—the result of the DNA formed when a particular sperm and egg join. Others may believe it is God’s work—She decides when it’s time to make another lesbian.

The Lynn Unitarians believed slavery was wrong. But they didn’t welcome Black people to their congregation. This year, we must go a step further than saying gay people

¹ Robert Alexander Smith, “Jan Earnst Matzeliger and the Lasting Machine,” in Elizabeth Hope Cushing, ed., *No Race of Imitators: Lynn and Her People, An Anthology*, Lynn: Lynn Historical Society, 1992, p. 100.

are OK. We must declare that people are *welcome* here, regardless of their sexual orientation.

It is important that we make that declaration as a *religious* community, because others continue to claim religious justification for discriminating against gays and lesbians. The Southern Baptists—America’s largest Protestant denomination—boycott Disney World. Why? Because the Walt Disney Company grants its gay employees the same benefits as its heterosexual workers. Rev. Jerry Falwell blamed gays and lesbians for the September 11 hijackings. The Boy Scouts of America bar gays and lesbians from serving as volunteer adult leaders. They told the U.S. Supreme Court that gay people are not “clean” and are not “morally straight”. Their public relations spokespeople say that gay people are not suitable role models for youth. And, they claim this position is based on the religious values of the majority of Americans. In fact, their position was supported in Court by the Southern Baptists, Mormons, Roman Catholics and Methodists.

Through history, people have used religion and the Bible to justify prejudice—including discrimination against people of color, women and the handicapped. Today we are beyond much of that. We would not find mainstream religions today saying that African Americans are not clean. Few religious people would claim that women aren’t morally straight. Today, the Bible would not be cited to say that the differently abled are not suitable role models.

But it is still acceptable in many circles—including religious circles—to discriminate against gay people. We need to make the statement that it is not acceptable here. And we need to welcome gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people. Not

because they deserve anything special, or anything different from others here. But because we need to declare that we will not accept society's—and other religious groups'—discrimination.

I first learned about Jan Matzeliger when my daughter, Hannah, was in elementary school. She was assigned to write a report on him for Black History Month. Her primary source, a children's book, told the story of his rejection by the Lynn Unitarians. I assume that every year thousands of elementary school children read the same book every February when they write their Black History Month reports.

Maybe someday, when my grandchildren write their reports for Gay History Month, they will read about a lesbian or gay man who found a spiritual home and a special welcome at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lynn.