# Abraham Maxim, Universalist Composer

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"Hallowell,"
"New Durham"/ "Hatfield,"
and "Portland"

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with texts by Isaac Watts and Abner Kneeland

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edited by Dan Harper Palo Alto, California: Unitarian Universalist Church of Palo Alto, 2016

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## Hallowell



Hallowell 2



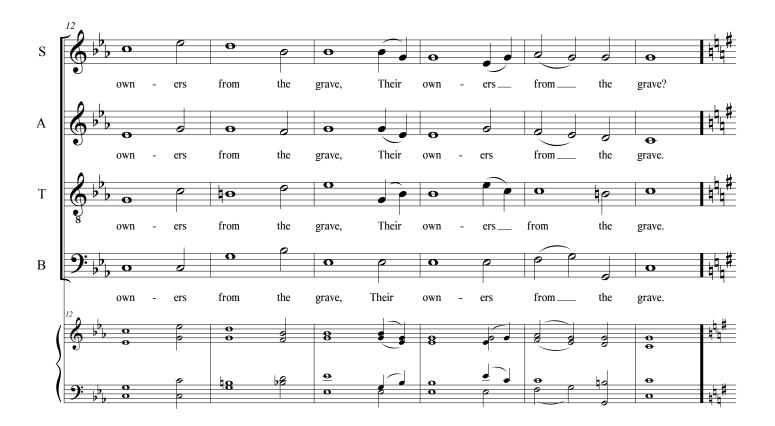
## New Durham / Hatfield

Text: Isaac Watts, "The Rich Sinner's Death," alt.

# New Durham

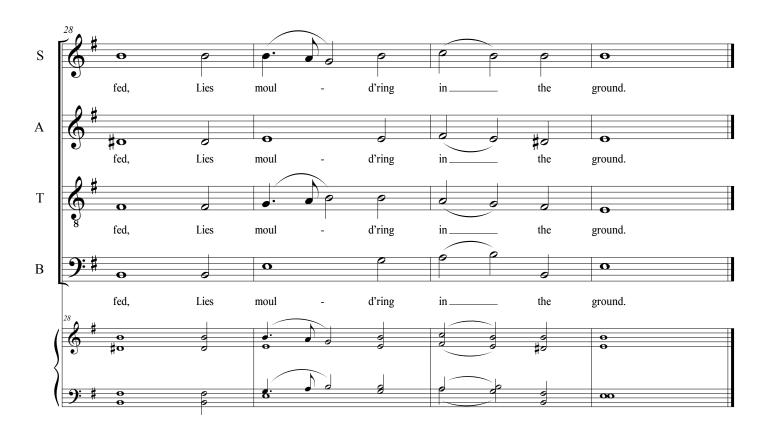






# Hatfield





## **Portland**

Abner Kneeland





Portland 2



#### Abraham Maxim, Universalist Composer

"Hallowell"
"New Durham" / "Hatfield"
"Portland"
with texts by Isaac Watts and Abner Kneeland

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The composer **Abraham Maxim** (1773-1829) is usually associated with the First New England School, though he was almost a generation younger than the best-known of those composers. He was born in Plymouth County, Massachusetts, and moved to Turner, Maine, in the 1790s, where he converted to Universalism (Stephen Marini, et al., *Norumbega Harmony*, University Press of Mississippi, 2003). Maxim published two collections of tunes: *The Oriental Harmony* (1802) and *The Northern Harmony* (four editions, 1805-1816). He made his living as a singing-master and farmer.

Maxim did not follow conventional rules of composition. Like fellow Maine composer Supply Belcher, he was "more concerned with writing smooth, singable melodies forming consonant intervals with the other parts than with creating chords which follow principles of tonal harmony" (Linda Davenport, *Supply Belcher: The Collected Works* [New York: Garland Pub., 1997], p. xxiv).

Soon after he published his tune-books, the style in which he composed was in retreat from the main cultural centers of the northeastern United States: "The transit of folk-hymnody from the North to the South seems to have taken place during the second decade of the nineteenth century, roughly coinciding with the retreat of the quasi-folk composed American music of the singing schools from urban to rural surroundings" (Irving Lowens, *Music and Musicians in Early America* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1964], p. 139). From 1822 on, Lowell Mason and other popularizers of "better music" led an effective campaign to turn the public away from the First New England School, and away from such forms as the fuguing tune ("Portland," Hallowell").

Maxim's works never achieved wide circulation, in part because his best compositions were fuguing tunes. A few of his best compositions were reprinted in the shape note tune-books of the early nineteenth century that gained popularity in the South and West. In the late nineteenth century, one of his tunes, "Turner," was reprinted in a handful of revival

hymnals. Today, his tune "Portland" remains in print in *The Sacred Harp*, a shape note tune-book still used by some Primitive Baptist congregations.

(Note that Maxim wrote his compositions so that the music could fit a variety of texts written in a standard meter. Thus, it is acceptable to substitute other texts for these compositions.)

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**Isaac Watts** (1674–1748), a towering figure of English-language hymnody and psalmody, reputedly gave away as much as a third of his income to the poor and to charity (Samuel Johnson, *Life of Isaac Watts*); "The Rich Sinner's Death," a metrical paraphrase of part of Psalm 49, reflects this concern for the poor. Towards the end of his life, Watts reportedly owned a pew in a Unitarian chapel, though he did not call himself a Unitarian.

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**Abner Kneeland** (1744-1874) began life as a conventional Protestant Christian, converted to Universalism, then went beyond the Universalism of his day to "free thought." By 1831 he had declared:

I believe...that God and Nature, so far as we can attach any rational idea to either, are synonymous terms. Hence, I am not an Atheist, but a Pantheist; that is, instead of believing there is no God, I believe that in the abstract, all is God.

For his beliefs, he was prosecuted under Massachusetts blasphemy laws, the last person to be so prosecuted.

The text "Goodness and mercy have no bound..." dates from Kneeland's years within the Universalist denomination, when he helped edit the Universalist hymnal, *Hymns Composed by Different Authors* (1808). Though not a particularly inspired hymn, this text reflects the sunny, optimistic side of Universalism of the day.

-Dan Harper

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Performance notes:

Typical tempi for early New England music are marked on the scores. Early New England music was most likely sung with a full voice and no vibrato. Though generally sung *a capella*, instruments ("bass viol" or cello, organ, etc.) could have been used where available.

(Total duration approx. 6:00)