

The Advocate, Thursday, July 13, 1978

Church walls trick eye

Church being restored painstakingly

By Steven Schwadron

A Columbia University professor and 10 graduate students are spending this summer erasing the walls of the Provincetown Universalist Church.

They are using artists' erasers to clean every inch of the church's walls as part of a total restoration of the 131-year-old Greek Revival structure, named a national historical site in 1972. The paint on the walls is water soluble, so no fluids can be used.

The students, led by Norman Weiss, assistant professor of architecture at Columbia, were attracted to the project because of the unique Italian trompe l'oeil-style interior designs. Trompe l'oeil means "trick of the eye" and gives a three-dimensional illusion on a flat surface. The most striking example of this design style in the church is the illusion of an alcove behind the pulpit. The wall is really completely straight.

The whole effect leaves the viewer anxious to run a hand over the surface to make sure that it really isn't sculpted.

All the interior design features, including floor-to-ceiling columns and inlays, are carefully painted on the walls—even including shadows—so that the designs look real from nearly every angle.

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The Restoration Committee of the Lower Cape, established by church members Joseph Acker and the late Jeff Bosworth 10 years ago, is overseeing the \$70,000 restoration project. Work was originally due to be finished in two years. But money—from donations and fund raisers—had to be diverted to pay for urgent structural repairs. The first \$9000, for example, went to bolster the steeple, which was leaning precariously. Later, the roof had to be repaired.

The church is the oldest public building on the Lower Cape still in its original usage. Inclusion in the register of historic places paved the way for federal matching funds. And it led to contracts in the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Through this group, restoration organizers found Professor Norman Weiss of Columbia, who enthusiastically accepted an offer to bring a group of graduate students in architecture and archaeology here for a summer internship to help restore the church's celebrated interior. Also involved in the summer restoration is Linda Tucker, an expert in restoring mural paintings.

The restorers, here since the beginning of June, will clean the entire interior of the auditorium, which seats 408, and repair cracks and loose plaster. They will repaint only where it is essential.

The large and graceful church, once so popular that churchgoers sometimes had to set up chairs in the aisles, now has only 31 regular members. But its Sunday services attract many tourists and the building itself was called "the jewel of Provincetown" by the late Catholic Monsignor Leo Duart.

The Protestant congregation dates back to the original Provincetown colony on Long Point. By 1829 the Universalists gathered in a small meetinghouse at Central

and Commercial Streets. Twenty years later, the membership decided to build "the most modern style of church building."

The regal steeple was influenced by Asher Benjamin, a renowned Boston Architect.

The membership engaged a young German artist, Carl Wendte, who had come to Boston two years earlier after studying in Italy. Hearing of his talents, the church membership commissioned him to decorate the walls and ceiling in the 54-by-54-foot auditorium.

Overhead, Wendte copied the marble dome of the Temple of Jupiter in Athens. On the flat walls, Wendte painted his deceptive three-dimensional designs.

After finishing here, Wendte started painting a mural in a Boston church. But the church was unheated and Wendte died from pneumonia. Years later, in 1920, Wendte's son, who became a Unitarian minister, was guest speaker at a commemorative service at the church.

"Wendte took a box of a building and created lavish architectural ornamentation, the image that the whole room was carved and inlaid," Weiss said. "There's an element of bravura and humor to it."

The trompe l'oeil style is common in Italian churches and other public buildings, from Roman times to the Renaissance, Weiss said.

Wendte worked thoroughly on the Universalist Church, using over 30 shades of dull greys to simulate ornate stonework.

"When the artist took it all off, the viewer is left guessing a bit," said Weiss. Even seasoned town history buffs who have been in the church frequently have asked him whether specific ornamentations are really just painted illusions.

The group plans to finish all restoration work by September, except for minor repairs and painting the exterior. Until then the biggest project is to clean the interior walls bearing the trompe l'oeil designs.

The walls, which have never been cleaned, are covered with heavy deposits of greasy dirt, particularly from coal and oil heating sources. Based on initial tests, Weiss, who is also a chemist, realized that Wendte's paints were water soluble and would also react badly to organic solvents like alcohol.

"When I told the students we were going to use erasers to clean the walls, everybody just stared at me," Weiss said. But as it turns out, the process has worked very easily. The grime comes right off under the erasers, leaving a clearly brighter surface behind. No further painting or glazing is needed, Weiss said.

The main auditorium is also adorned with a dignified mahogany pulpit. The upholstered pews have mahogany railings and armrests. At the end of each pew is an ivory medallion thought until recently to be carved from whales' teeth. A local craftsman recently concluded that the ivory comes from elephant tusks.

The church also features a valuable chandelier and clock. The organ, dating back to the late 1800s, is the oldest in use on the Cape.

The Advocate, Thursday, December 28, 1978

Universalist church to celebrate 150th by honoring town

By Mary Bauer

The First Universalist Church will celebrate its 150th anniversary next year by turning the spotlight on Provincetown.

The various elements that enrich the town's character—fishermen, artists, town officials, church members—will be honored in four ecumenical services during 1979.

An old ship's lantern recently bought in Sandwich and installed in the church tower will be dedicated in a nighttime ceremony commemorating the town's fishermen.

The church's minister, the Rev. Richardson Reid, got the idea for raising the lantern from a church on Nantucket at which his father preached. From the steeple there the light beams out to a great distance offshore.

The evolution of the Universalist Church traces many of the currents of Provincetown culture as scraps of sea life mark the ebb and flow of the tides.

The church was established in 1829, based on the philosophical arguments of John Murray, a feisty iconoclast who shouted "No!" into the bitter face of English Calvinism. Murray left England shortly thereafter.

Calvin had given his name to an aristocratic sect which preached predestination. Some of us, he said, are chosen for eternal salvation even before our births. The rest of you are damned. Good conduct was enforced by the reminder that an individual's behavior indicated the direction he might expect to head after death.

Murray scorned this doctrine of fatalism and moral exclusiveness. He preached a democratic creed of self-determination in which anyone who adopts Christ and leads a good life can be saved.

And some people in Provincetown adopted Murray. As the story goes, a book of Murray's life was taken from the harbor by two children in 1820. Many people in town must have absorbed Murray's writings during the

nine years before the church was opened.

They apparently were not a group to leap into decisions preferring to lend their hearts and backs to a philosophy worth the investment. They were of English and Scottish descent, an independent, hardy, resourceful race.

These predecessors of today's town meetings liked the idea of a democratic universe in which each individual opens his life to a blank page and a free choice for good or evil.

These predecessors of today's fishermen preferred to face a stormy sea of moral choices rather than resign their souls to a fate written before their births.

Historically, they descended from the pilgrim separatists, who fled England rather than conform to the powerful Church of England's rules.

Most of the new Universalists were probably former Congregationalists. This name came into use because the congregations governed their individual town churches. Members ran church affairs, hired and fired ministers, and above all never took orders from upper echelons or worldwide authorities.

This New World outlook of fierce independence and self-determination was ingrained in both religious and civil governance by the time the Universalists here opened their first church on Central and Commercial Streets in 1829, which is now the location of the Provincetown Heritage Museum, a former church built by the Methodists.

Jonathon Farr, the first minister, was paid \$10 a week for his services.

In 1847, the Universalists sold the old building to the Methodists and built the historic church that now graces downtown. Much study and consideration went into the choice of style for the new church, Greek Revival.

The building, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, incorporates some elements of classical architecture. The revival flourished in this country from

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